WORLDS OF POWER™

A novel based on the best-selling NINTENDO® game by MINDSCAPE

INFILTRATOR™

Book created by F.X. Nine

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SCHOLASTIC

Die, Intruders!

There was something standing in the door, something large.

It was shaped like a human, but made of steel. Its eyes were small light sensors that were focused on Johnny and Chip. Its arms were powerful lasers, surrounded by bayonetlike claws.

There was a strange, evil grin on its face. As it rolled toward them, the hinges of its mouth slowly opened.

Like a nest of snakes, a tangle of black steel-reinforced rope shot out of the mouth, looping around Johnny and Chip. The robot approached, lasers flashing.

"Die, intruders!" its mechanical voice shouted.

WORLDS OF POWER

Book #7

INFILTRATOR

by F. X. Nine

A deadly race against time!

The Infiltrator:
Ace helicopter pilot, brain surgeon, concert pianist, motorcycle racer, secret agent, and all-around nice guy.

The Mad Leader:
Dangerous fanatic, ruthless criminal, liar, cheat, litterbug, and all-around bad guy.

The Mission:
Stop the Mad Leader before he carries out his plan for world destruction. There's not a moment to lose, for every second brings the power-hungry maniac closer to his goal.

The complete story of the Nintendo® action-adventure game — with loads of game-solving hints throughout.

INFILTRATOR

A novel based on the best-selling game by MINDSCAPE

Book created by F.X. Nine

Written by A.L. Singer

A Seth Godin Production

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A
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READING
TIME
RELEASE
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For Helene.

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Chapter 1

Johnny McGibbits hurtled across the room. His jet black hair whipped his face, stinging his eyes. He fell to the floor, rolled, and sprang to his feet. Although six feet four and two hundred pounds, his movements were quick as a cougar's.

The laser's *zzzzap* was still ringing faintly in his ears.

His dark brown eyes scanned the room, which was now empty. Quickly he wiped off his arm. A patch of his shirtsleeve fell to the floor. Under the gaping hole, there was a tiny trickle of blood. Only a scrape.

“That was close,” he muttered.

Whipping a small canister out of his pocket, he sprayed the scrape with a white foam. The bleeding stopped, but the foam stung. Boy, did it sting.

Johnny “Jimbo” McGibbits wasn't happy about that.

He pulled out a pocket-size computer, emblazoned with the letters MI. Quickly he punched in the words FIRST-AID SPRAY — ADJUST CAMPHOR CONTENT TO .05 PARTS PER MILLION.

“Die, filthy dog!”

Johnny dropped the computer and spun around. He recognized the mechanical voice. It was as loud as he remembered it, and twice as ugly. He couldn't see anything, but he knew what was coming — and it wasn't going to be pretty.

The wall in front of him began to vibrate, then shake violently. With an explosion of plaster and metal strips, it collapsed.

Thonnnk!

The outline of a giant leg kicked slowly through the rubble. Its knee was ringed with sharp spikes. Its thigh and calf were pistons of greased steel.

Then the other leg appeared through the rising dust, and finally Johnny could see the entire creature. From ten feet above,

its massive, saw-toothed face grinned down at him.

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust…” the creature chanted, raising its right arm, which tapered into a semiautomatic rifle.

Johnny laughed. “A poet,” he said.

The sound of bullets filled the room. Johnny ducked. In the same move, he lunged headfirst toward the creature.

Clllammmp! The mechanical beast wrapped its foot-long fingers around Johnny's neck. But Johnny had *his* fingers firmly planted on a control panel in the creature's side. As he gasped for breath, he punched a series of twenty-three numbers.

There was a long beep. Johnny began to see red, then black.

Suddenly the creature went limp.

So did Johnny. He fell to the floor in a heap.

For a long moment, nothing happened. Slowly Johnny's wind returned, then his sight. He looked at the creature and smiled.

“Not bad,” he said under his breath. “Not bad at all.”

He picked up his pocket computer and made a few calculations. Behind him, a panel in the wall began to open. The enormous steel barrel of a cannon poked through.

Johnny never noticed the barrel swiveling to face him. He didn't turn until he heard the explosion of cannon fire.

But by then, it was too late.

Chapter 2

Hhhrrroommmmmmm!

The blast shook the room. Whit light flashed in Johnny's eyes, blinding him. He felt his right leg go numb.

Johnny shot across the room again, as if he were a crumb being swept up by a broom. He flew past the inert giant creature, then slammed against the wall.

“All right, this is getting ridiculous!” came a voice over a loudspeaker.

Johnny blinked his eyes and rose to his feet. “Come on, Madge,” he called back, “this is the only fun I get all day!” Brushing himself off, he looked at the right leg of his jeans. The only damage he could find was a small, round black mark. He smiled. “Takes a blasting, keeps on lasting.”

An impatient-looking woman burst through a door next to the cannon. Her fiery red hair was drawn back in a tight ponytail, and her steel-blue eyes were set with determination. “Okay, McGibbits” — she only called him McGibbits when she was angry — “if you want to kill yourself and destroy our company's biggest asset —”

“That's what I like about you, Madge,” Johnny said, “always concerned about the human side of things.”

“Well — I meant — you know what I'm saying,” Madge sputtered.

“You like the slogan?” Johnny asked brightly.

“What?”

He pointed to the black mark on his jeans. “McGibbits Industries' new bulletproof denim, ‘Takes a blasting, keeps on lasting!’ Catchy, huh?”

“That's what I want to talk to you about! You are the President, CEO, and Chief Inventor of McGibbits Industries. Ninety-nine percent of our products are nonviolent. Can't you just test those? I mean, you can use animals to test the dangerous

products!”

“I don't believe in live-animal testing,” Johnny said. “You know that.”

“Well then, use a dummy or something!” Madge threw her hands up. “If we lose you, McGibbits Industries goes under.”

Johnny took out his pocket computer. “Okay, Madge, here's a progress report. The infrared-directional dual laser seems in good shape. Our Polyclot First-Aid Spray works, but we have to get rid of that sting. The Attack Cyborg is better than I expected… and you saw how the bulletproof denim reacted.”

He ejected a disk and flipped it to Madge. “Please print a hard copy, if you don't mind — oh, and get someone to repair that wall. Are we on schedule?”

Madge caught the disk and then looked at her watch. “Uh, well, no. Your concert's in about a half hour.”

“Piece of cake,” Johnny said. “Nothing's ever on time in Washington, anyway.”

He went through the door and grabbed a spring-loaded exercise grip from a table. Squeezing the grip in his right hand, he began jogging down a rubberized indoor track toward the building exit. “How'm I doing?” he called over his shoulder.

Keeping pace, Madge looked at a pedometer she was carrying. “Four-and-a-half-minute miles at this rate.”

Johnny shook his head. “Gotta work on that.”

Madge was breathing hard now. “As your personal trainer, I think you're doing just great —”

“Thanks.”

“— but using that handgrip is about the dumbest thing you can do right now. Your hands'll get stiff for the concert.”

Johnny chuckled. “The digital readout says I'm close to the record for the world's strongest grip. I can't give up now.”

Madge rolled her eyes. “Uh, Johnny… the record was set by a steel vise.”

As they approached the end of the hallway, a set of double doors swung open automatically. Johnny and Madge raced through

a small chamber with a low ceiling. A large sign warned: M.I. GENETICS LAB WORKERS MUST DISINFECT BEFORE LEAVING. ALL OTHERS PROCEED. At the other end, a door opened for them and they ran out into a parking lot.

A stretch limo was waiting for them. Electrodes were attached to either side of its trunk by long wires that extended down to a rectangular metal platform in the ground. A cheerful, bearded face looked out the driver's window. “Engine's recharged to ninety percent, Doctor McGibbits!” he said.

“That'll be plenty,” Johnny said, slipping into the backseat with Madge. “McGibbits National Library, please, Williams.”

The driver pushed a button and the electrodes fell to the ground. As the car took off, the only sound was a *whoosh* of wind.

“Yee-hah!” Williams called out.

“Beg pardon?” Johnny said.

“Uh, sorry, sir,” Williams said. “I can't help myself. This thing handles better than a gas engine car!”

“Not to mention what it does for the environment,” Johnny said.

“Another success from the brilliant mind of our own Johnny,” Madge said dryly.

Ignoring the remark, Johnny picked up a mobile phone and punched a number that was preset to McGibbits Memorial Hospital. "Doctor Diao, please,” he said. “Hello, Ed, how's our patient? Recovered from the artificial brain tissue transplant? … Great! No, don't thank me, you did a lot of the work, too… Okay, send my regards. See you.”

He punched in another number. “Yeah, Manny, it's Jimbo-Baby. Vangaurd Pictures still wants me for that film? …Starring role, yeah…billing above the title, good…straight percentage of the box office gross…. Hey, we're in business! Phone Madge at three o’clock with my shooting schedule. Love ya, babe.”

Another number. “Listen, Ferraro, I drew up a new set of blueprints for the library's East Wing…. Yeah, it solves the space problem by using some geodesic design elements…. Yep, we still keep the Neo-Georgian exterior…right…. You're welcome, pal.”

Johnny hung up and grabbed his handgrip again.

“Uh, listen, genius boy,” Madge said. “Hate to interrupt, but aren't you forgetting something?” She looked at Johnny's gunpowder-stained clothes. “Really nice concert wear.”

“Oops,” Johnny said. Quickly he began unbuttoning his workshirt.

“Hey! What are you doing?” Madge cried out, turning away. “There's a lady present!”

“Don't worry.” Johnny stripped off his clothes to reveal a spanking clean tuxedo underneath. “It's called underdressing. An old trick from my musical comedy days at the Milwaukee Melody Top.”

“Show off,” Madge muttered.

“Exactly the opposite,” Johnny said, squeezing the handgrip.

“Johnny, please put that thing down before you wear your fingers out!”

“Madge, please,” Johnny said soothingly. “Get a grip.”

Moments later, as Johnny strolled toward the entrance of the McGibbits Memorial Library, a tidal wave of reporters rushed to him. “Whats the matter guys?” Johnny called out. “Murderers took the day off?”

He was answered by a barage of questions.

A reporter from *Famous Beyond Belief* magazine asked, “Does your fan club really number two hundred million?”

“I hope not,” Johnny said. “I don't have time to answer all those letters.”

“Is it true you're going to announce your candidacy for President?” asked a writer from *Journal of Political Turpitude*.

“President of what?” Johnny said.

“How do you plan to handle the musicians' strike at your concert tonight?” came a question from the local radio station reporter.

That last question threw Johnny. What musicians' strike? he wanted to ask. Instead, he turned to Madge and said, “I need the McGibbits 3D Sound Digital Sampler.”

“Yes, sir, oh, great and powerful chief,” Madge murmered.

As she elbowed her way back through the crowd, Johnny entered the great hall of the library and stepped up onto the conductor's podium. Behind him was a grand piano — and thirty empty seats with thirty empty music stands.

The crowd fell silent. Johnny glanced over his shoulder, then smiled to the crowd. With expert comic timing, his face went limp and he quickly looked back again at the empty seats where the musicians should have been.

A laugh shivered through the crowd. It was just what Johnny wanted.

“Uh, Mr. President and honerable guests,” Johnny announced, “it looks like my musicians made other plans— but I plan to give you your money's worth. Now, if you'll pardon me for a moment…”

He stepped down, just as Madge came racing backstage with a long plastic case. “I couldn't find the plug,” she said.

“It's okay,” Johnny replied. “This model has a thirty-hour solar battery inside.” He opened the case to reveal a piano keyboard attached to a computer screen. With lightning quickness, Johnny's fingers danced over the keys. The screen lit up with a flurry of musical notes arranged on staff lines.

“Done,” Johnny said after about three minutes. “Each line programmed with a sample of sound from the correct instrument, with adjustments for dynamics.”

“Uh, sure,” Madge said. “Whatever you say.”

The crowd was restless as Johnny returned to the stage. He held up his keyboard/computer and said, “Introducing my orchestra!”

There was a smattering of confused applause. Johnny set the keyboard on the floor next to the piano. then he attached it to a set of speakers and turned it on. “Ladies and gentlemen, the McGibbits Concerto number twelve in F-sharp.”

A soaring violin entrance was followed by a soft tympani beat. Then came the wind instruments, and Johnny prepared for his piano solo.

As he began playing to the accompaniment of his computer orchestra, the audience burst into wild applause. Madge sat beside him and turned pages, whispering, “Do you fail at anything?”

“I make a terrible cup of coffee,” Johnny said.

He was hardly aware of a black-suited man who came up behind Madge and whispered something in her ear. Madge's face turned as white as ash and her hands dropped to her lap.

“Madge!” Johnny said under his breath. “Madge! Turn the page!”

Madge spun around and obeyed, and the man disappeared behind the rear curtain. She tried to speak, but the words caught in her mouth. Johnny was practically pounding the piano now. He was off his seat, half standing, half sitting, being carried away by the concerto's most dramatic passage.

“Johnny, th-that man was from the CIA,” Madge finally managed to say into Johnny's ear. “H-he told me to give you a message.”

“What?” Johnny asked, practically shouting to be heard over the music.

“The world is in dire trouble —”

“Tire trouble? He interrupted my concert to talk about cars?”

“Dire trouble!” Madge was shouting now, too. “You're to report to CIA headquarters at once!”

Johnny felt his heart sink. No one turned down a command like that — not even Johnny McGibbits. But he couldn't just walk out on the President! Besides, his concerto wasn't even half over.

He had to think of something. Fast.

Game Hint

Change into the janitor's uniform as soon as possible. You will reduce your contact with the enemy.

Chapter 3

Fast.

That was the word. Johnny's hand darted out to the keyboard/computer. He flipped a knob, and the "orchestra" began to play faster… and faster.

Johnny's fingers were a blur. Madge could barely turn the pages in time. The audience sat in awe, their eyes wide with amazement.

Thirty-seven seconds later, Johnny struck the final chord. Its echo hung in the auditorium just long enough for the stunned crowd to recover.

And when they did, they leapt to their feet and roared approval. Stone-faced men in gray suits were screaming like children; critics dropped their notebooks and whistled.

"Thank you!" Johnny cried out. He took a deep bow, grabbed Madge by the arm, and ran offstage.

As they left, they could hear rhythmic shouting, "Encore! Encore! Encore!"

"It's as if you just gave a rock concert!" Madge said, racing out the back door.

"That's next week," Johnny replied. "Remind me to fix my guitar."

They wound their way through a long tunnel, which led to an outdoor parking lot. There, Williams was waiting in the limo. "That was fast. What'd you play? 'The Minute Waltz'?" he called out.

"The trunk, please," Johnny replied, going straight to the rear of the car. He could see Williams reaching for the trunk release under the dashboard. In anticipation, Johnny dug his fingers under the trunk's edge and pulled up.

"Aagh!" Johnny's face twisted into a grimace. He hunched over, clutching his hands to his chest.

“Johnny!” Madge shouted. She sprinted toward him, pulling him to the ground.

Johnny landed hard, then gave Madge a quizzical look. “That was great, Madge. You're a terrific bodyguard. Can we go now?”

“ ‘Can we go now?’ ” Madge repeated. “How can you be so calm? Someone just took a shot at you!”

“Someone took a shot at me?” Johnny frowned, then began to laugh. “There was no sniper, Madge! My hand cramped!”

“Your hand?” Madge slowly rose to her feet. “Oh, boy, McGibbits, if I weren't working for you, I would give you a piece of my mind —”

“That never stopped you before.”

And it didn't now. “I told you not to use that handgrip,” Madge said, grabbing his hand. “But did you listen? No! You had to be Superman, didn't you?”

Johnny took deep breaths as she gave his hand a good strong massage. “Madge,” he said, “I will never doubt you again.”

“Right,” Madge replied skeptically. She turned toward the front of the limo. “Williams, would you get the chopper, please?”

In response, Williams hopped out of the limo and lifted the trunk. He took out a large, black metal box emblazoned with the words GIZMO XT–LITE FOLDING HELICOPTER. With a few sharp snaps, he released the latches and the box fell away to reveal a dense network of metal machinery.

It took him less than a minute to unfold it into the world's most sophisticated Piece of portable transportation — a full-powered, one-seated helicopter designed and built by McGibbits Industries.

Johnny released his hand from Madge and flexed his fingers. He reached into the trunk and pulled out a backpack, which contained one invention he always took with him — the McGibbits Industries Notebook-Sized Laptop Computer. As he climbed into the helicopter, both Williams and Madge looked uneasy. “I tell ya,” Williams said, “you won't ever see me in that thing.”

“I hope not,” Johnny replied. “There's only room for one.”

With that, he started the engine. The helicopter wobbled a bit,

then lifted off the ground. Madge and Williams looked forlorn as they waved good-bye.

Johnny laughed. They reminded him of Dorothy and the Scarecrow waving to the Wizard of Oz as he took off in his balloon.

With one big difference. The Wizard couldn't control his craft — but Johnny could.

He navigated the little chopper north over the stone buildings of Washington to the suburb of Langley Park. There, he landed on the CIA heliport. As he climbed out, a smiling air traffic controller yelled, “Where'd you get that thing?”

“Amazing what you can find in a Cracker Jack box,” Johnny answered.

He summoned the rooftop elevator and took it to the basement level. From there it was a short walk to the office of his CIA contact, General Steve Dennis.

General Dennis rose from his desk with a smile. His once trim Physique was now a little thick around the stomach, and his balding scalp shone in the fluorescent lights.

“Jimbo!” Dennis said, looking at his watch. “Six minutes. What took you so long?”

“I came as fast as I could,” Johnny said.

“I figured by now you'd have invented a way to beam yourself over here or something.”

“Well, as a matter of fact —”

“Never mind, I was just kidding!” Dennis said. “I hope you're ready to do a little traveling.”

“Where to?”

“Yttrmchszia.”

“*Gesundheit*,” Johnny said.

Dennis looked puzzled. He waited a moment, then said, “Well? Can you go?”

“Go where?”

“Yttrmchszia!”

“*Gesundheit*!” Johnny repeated.

“No! That's a country, Jimbo! Yttrmchszia is the name of a —”

Johnny smiled. “I know. I was just… kidding, General.”

Dennis arched a wary eyebrow. “Yes, of course. Now, you may remember a man called the Mad Leader —”

“Hasn't been seen in public, never had a name, lived in the streets as a child, escaped from reform schools and prisons, gathered knowledge by posing as a janitor in a munitions plant, stole the plant's cash and set up a puppet dictatorship on a South Sea Island, was overthrown by a CIA-backed junta last year, presumed drowned in a shipwreck —”

“Uh, right, Jimbo-baby,” Dennis said, cutting him off. “That was meant to be a yes-or-no question.”

“Sorry.”

“Anyway, you wer right on all counts but one. The Mad Leader did not drown. He washed ashore in Indonesia, then eventually made the long trek north to Yttrmchszia. As you may know, the Yttrmchszians are a fiercely independent people in the midst of a terrible economic depression, yet they have never accepted outside help.”

“Not a very efficient way to do business,” Johnny remarked.

“Well, part of it is due to the Yttrmchsz language,” Dennis said. “It uses no vowels, and very few outsiders have been able to master it.”

“Except for the Mad Leader, I presume.”

“You presume right. He's a brilliant man, perhaps the most brilliant man on Earth — present company excluded, of course.”

“Thank you.”

“He lived among the people, absorbed the language, and slowly built a power base. Now he's got a band of loyal followers in a sprawling compound by the Lrngsdvrn River. Some of our spies have managed to penetrate, and they've just discovered a massive nerve gas facility there. The stuff is deadly, Jimbo.”

“So where do I fit in?” Johnny asked

“Since we don't know the composition of the gas, we can't defend against it.” General Dennis leaned forward, focusing

intently on Johnny's eyes. “I need you to be an Infiltrator. You must get into the compound, find the nerve gas, and deactivate it. You'll be undercover, of course — we'll provide you with a guard uniform, fake ID papers, a pocket-size explosives detector, and a few tear-gas grenades, just in case.”

“Any idea what this nerve gas is made of?” Johnny asked.

Dennis shook his head. “All we know is that it's created by a highly volatile acid. When the acid is pressurized or exposed to air, it releases the gas. According to our spies, the Mad Leader stores the acid in a master vat. We also suspect that a neutralizing chemical exists somwhere in th Mad Leader's compound.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small plastic container with a vial of blue liquid in it. “In case you run into complications, I'm giving you a chemical analyzer.”

Johnny took the kit, opened the vial, and sniffed. “I have a better formula in my limo trunk. I can go back and get it — and if you give me some instructional material in Yttrmchsz, I can master the language overnight, no problem —”

Dennis shook his head. “There is a problem, Jimbo-Baby. We have no time, not even overnight. Our sources sense that the Mad Leader may even act by the end of the day. But don't worry about learning the language — we've got that covered, as you'll soon find out.”

“I'm not worried,” Johnny said.

“Atta boy,” Dennis replied. He got up from his chair and began to escort Johnny to the door. “Oh, by the way, there will be a few other Infiltrators on this mission. They're all undercover, and they may appear hostile. Here's a list of code names that'll identify you as a good guy.” He took a piece of paper from his desk and gave it to Johnny. “In the chopper there's a map of air routes, a uniform, and some other essentials.”

“Thanks, Steve,” Johnny said, tucking the paper into his own pocket. “I won't let you down.”

Dennis nodded, but his forehead was creased with concern. “I want you to be extra careful, Jimbo. I hate to admit it, but many of our men have been completely unprepared for the dangers they faced.”

“Well, live and learn,” Johnny said.

“Not always.”Dennis sighed heavily. “Uh, Jimbo, there's one thing I haven't told you.”

“Let me guess,” Johnny said. “I need a shower.”

Dennis tried to smile, but it was forced. He turned away momentarily, as if searching for words. When he looked back at Johnny, he seemed to have aged ten years.

“Jimbo,” he said finally, “not one of our men has ever come back alive.”

Chapter 4

Johnny and General Dennis took the elevator back up to the heliport. This time an enormous helicopter was waiting. Its blades whirred noisily, throwing a strobelike shadow over a bright orange-and-red decal on its side.

With a smile, Johnny read the decal aloud. " 'Gizmo DHX–1 Attack Chopper' — nice sound."

"Know how to work it?" Dennis asked with a sly smile.

"Know how?" Johnny said. "I designed the thing myself."

He hopped aboard, tossing his backpack behind the fake bearskin seat. "Good morning, Doctor McGibbits," came an electronic voice over stereo speakers.

"It recognizes my silhouette," Johnny called out to Dennis.

"Yeah?" Dennis said, rubbing his bald scalp. "When I go in there, it says, 'Good morning, Mr. Gorbachev.' "

Layers of pinlights blinked at Johnny from the dashboard. His eyes scanned them all, reading them instantly. "Weapon power levels full… fuel gauges full… computer functioning… all systems go," he said.

"Whatever you say," Dennis remarked. "It all looks like gobbledygook to me."

"It's simple, Steve," Johnny said. "It runs on a Turbine Thrust Dual-Propulsion Whizbang Whirler engine, capable of four hundred fifty knots — with a Whizbang Whomper turbo booster, in case of emergencies. We've got four Whizbang Waster air-to-air heat-seeking missiles and magnesium flares to use as decoys against their missiles. Also a chaff disperser, which sends out metal scraps to throw off their radar guided missiles. And my experimental Whizbang Whisper system is on the cutting edge of acoustic technology — it makes the chopper operate in absolute silence. Then there's the —"

"Hold it!" Dennis said. "Save all that for some time when I can

take notes."

"Sorry, boss," Johnny replied. He grabbed the shoulder harness from behind him, but as he strapped it around his body, he suddenly stopped.

There, in the seat next to him, was a messy pile of comic books.

Johnny stared at it for a second. He was used to knowing answers, solving problems — but he drew a blank on this one. "Uh…Steve?" he said.

General Dennis was looking over his shoulder. "I don't know where he is," he said. "I've got someone looking for him."

"Looking for whom?" Johnny replied.

"Your partner."

"My what?"

Dennis pointed to the comics. "Chip's a little young, but smart as a whip."

Johnny looked at him as if he were crazy. "Chip? Wait a minute —"

"But, you know, sixteen is a lot older than it was when we were kids," Dennis continued. "This guy can crack a safe faster than I can open a refrigerator. And he knows more foreign languages than I knew existed!"

"So when you said I didn't need to worry about learning you meant —"

"You got it!" Dennis said. "The kid is fluent. Like a native. You'll like him, Steve. He's our youngest junior agent, and he can't wait to meet you. You're a real hero to him."

"Hold it!" Johnny said. "I can't believe my ears, Steve. You know how I operate by now."

"Well, I know you've never had a partner before, if that's what you mean —"

"Steve, I don't work with partners," Johnny said sharply.

Dennis gave him a confident smile. "Oh, you'll adjust like a pro."

“I work alone, Steve — everybody knows that. No offense, buddy, but I've never met anyone who could work with me. My strategies are complex, my decisions split second —”

“But Jimbo, I can't change the requisition now!” Dennis pleaded. “Besides we can’t train you in Yttrmchsz fast enough!”

Johnny was beginning to see red. The idea of facing death side-by-side with a teenage comic-book fanatic turned his stomach. “Read my lips, Steve: the answer is n —”

“*Hey baba riba, she-bop bam-boom!*” shrieked a voice from the chopper's passenger door. “If it isn't Johnny McGibbits, the king of the gadgets!”

Johnny whirled around. The face in the door had wide eyes and a grin that stretched from ear to ear. The modified Mohawk haircut had the name CHIP carved into the left side.

No. It can't be. It won't be. That was all Johnny could think. He'd march into headquarters and demand to be taken off the case… He'd throw the comics across the runway and fly away while Chip went running after them… He'd —

No.

He could do no such thing, and he knew it. This was a top-secret mission, and any delay could cost thousands of lives — not to mention the fate of the free world.

Chip was climbing aboard now. His gum chewing made loud, wet, cracking noises. The only louder sound was the chopping of the helicopter blades.

Unless, of course, you counted the grinding of Johnny McGibbits's teeth.

Chapter 5

Ree-bop-ba-bop-ba-bop-ba-ba-bop-ba-ba-dang-a-dong ding…

Johnny could feel the blood boiling right behind his eyes. He had designed the chopper with a built-in CD player — but not to play this kind of music!

“Uh, Chip,” he said between clenched teeth.

Chip was in a world of his own. He bounced happily to the music in the copilot's seat. “Whoa!” He blurted out, holding an imaginary microphone. “It's Chip Conley, folks, a hip bopper on a Chip chopper with a special guest rocker, Jumpin' Jimbo-Baby McGibbits — bringin' you the hits of the fifties here on WCIA —”

“*Graaagghh!*” Johnny was surprised at the strangled-sounding cry that came out of his own mouth. He reached out and flipped off the CD player. The chopping of the helicopter blades was again the only sound — and a relief to his ears.

“Great imitation, Jimbo-Baby!” Chip said, grinning. “I didn't know you did animals! Can you do a coyote howl? My dad does a great —”

“First of all,” Johnny cut in. “I do not ‘do’ animals. That was a cry of frustration, something that hardly ever happens to me. Second, I am not ‘Jimbo-Baby’ to you. ‘Doctor McGibbits’ will do fine. Third, you are along on this trip as my guest — strictly to help as an interpreter until I can master the language.”

He waited for a response, but his young assistant just stared blankly at him.

“And fourth,” Johnny said, “you will not play fifties music. I hate fifties music.”

“Wow,” Chip said softly. “Totally cool.”

“What?”

“You are, like, the coolest I have ever seen!” Chip said.

Johnny gritted his teeth. “Sorry, sir” would have been a fine answer from Chip. Even “Yes, sir.” But “Wow, totally cool” was out

of the ballpark.

With a sharp yank, Johnny pulled back the accelerator.

Chuck-a-chuck-a-chuck-a-chuck… The blades got louder as the chopper lifted off the helipad. “Yee-hah!” shouted Chip.

Johnny steered smoothly toward the ocean. “Hang on, kid,” he said “We're going full throttle.”

He felt his neck press backward against his headrest. The chopper swung toward the coast. Within seconds, they were racing across the Atlantic Ocean.

“*Ghtlsdn tsk lbdnskzs!*” shouted Chip.

“You'll have to speak more clearly.” Johnny shouted. “The rotors are loud!”

“*Ghtlsdn tsk lbdnskzs!*” Chip repeated. “That's ‘what a view!’ in Yttrmchsz.”

Johnny felt his face turning red. The kid was trying to make a fool of him now, talking in a language he didn't understand! Well, two could play that game.

“*Poli oraio!*”Johnny answered, using the Greek phrase for very beautiful.

“*Ne, omorfos!*” Chip replied in a perfect Greek accent.

Johnny gave him a silent, sidelong glance.

“That means, ‘yes, wonderful’,” Chip said.

“I know what it means!” Johnny said. “How do you know Greek?”

Chip grinned. “Trade secret.”

That did it. Johnny whirled around and glared at his young partner. He opened his mouth, not knowing what would come out.

“Haymish requesting identification!” came a mechanical voice, cutting him off.

In the distance, a foreboding black fighter plane approached.

“Oops,” Chip said. His hand darted out to a microphone on the dashboard. “Overlord!” he shouted.

“What are you doing?” Johnny shouted. “Haymish is one of ours! You were Supposed to say ‘Infiltrator’! You just gave him the

enemy password!”

Chip's face went pale. “Uh-oh… I thought Haymish meant —”

Wwwwoccckkk!

The chopper jolted. Johnny felt his stomach turn. “Activate the flares!” he shouted.

“Flares… flares,” Chip felt around the dashboard, his fingers shaking.

There was a flash of light from the attack plane. Another missile.

“This one!” Johnny shouted, pulling the correct lever. A glowing orb shot out from the side of the chopper.

Before their eyes, the attack plane's missile swerved in midair, following the flare. Both exploded harmlessly in the distance.

“I'll get 'im now!” Chip shouted.

“No!” Johnny replied. “Let me do it.” He grabbed another lever and pulled it skillfully one way, then the other. Lining up the plane in his sight, he fired.

Sssashhh! The very tip of the attack plane's left wing smashed. The plane wobbled, then veered off southward.

“Tough luck, huh?” Chip said. “You should have aimed just a couple degrees to the left —”

“Chip, it's one of ours, remember?” Johnny said, trying not to lose patience. “Because of your mistake, he thinks we're the enemy. I had to put him out of commission so he wouldn't attack us — but I couldn't kill him!”

Chip sank into his seat. “Sorry.”

“Boomer requesting identification!” another mechanical voice suddenly burst out.

Another jet, almost identical to the first, appeared over the horizon.

“That's one of the Mad Leader's jets,” Johnny said. He grabbed the mike and answered, “Overlord!”

“You are cleared to proceed ” came the response. The jet veered away and disappeared.

A faint smile came across Johnny's face. He and Chip settled into an uncomfortable silence. It wasn't until an hour later that another attack jet flew toward them.

"They've really got this corridor covered," Johnny said. "Let's send out a request."

"I'll do it!" Chip volunteered. Grabbing the mike, he called out, "Request ID!"

"Whipple requesting ID!" was the response.

"I recognize that," Chip said excitedly. "It's one of ours, right?"

Johnny nodded wearily.

"Infiltrator!" Chip announced. He turned to Johnny with a sheepish grin. "See, I’m not a total dork."

Johnny couldn't help but smile. He looked at his partner and shrugged. "Hey, I never said you were a —”

But Chip's eyes were focused dead ahead. "Whoa! Some friend!" he said.

Johnny whipped around. "Whipple" was screaming toward them. With a sudden, sickening boom, it released a bright orange missile — heading right for their windshield!

Chapter 6

“It's an enemy plane!” Johnny cried out. “We've been double-crossed!”

“I'll shoot the flares!” Chip said. He quickly pressed the flare button. With a loud *peeeoooo*, the glowing orb shot out to the left.

This time, though, the approaching missile didn't swerve an inch.

“Hey, what's going on?” Chip said.

“It must be radar guided!” Johnny shouted. Quickly he reached for the button marked CHAFF. There was a squeaking noise as a bomb bay opened beneath them, releasing strips of scrap metal into the air.

The enemy missile was less than fifty yards away. It was as bright as the sun. Chip closed his eyes and cringed.

Fooooom! The chopper rocked with the force of an explosion. Chip screamed, “Mom!”

Johnny banked right, away from the attack plane. Slowly Chip lifted his head. He looked around, still ghostly pale. “Doctor McGibbits?” he said shakily. “Is that you?”

“Who did you think I was?” Johnny replied with a chuckle. “Saint Peter?”

“What about the —”

“The missile went after the chaff,” Johnny said. “It all blew up below us. We're safe.”

Chip sat up straight. His eyes blazed with anger. “Yeah? Let's waste this guy!” He grabbed the lever marked CANNON and pulled.

A loud boom shook the chopper again, and a shot whistled toward the attack plane.

Johnny yanked his assistant's hand away. “Chip, I'm going to ground you! We have one goal in mind — to get to Yttrmchszia.

We're not here to play games."

"But he attacked us!" Chip complained.

The cannon shot barely missed the enemy plane, which peeled off to the left and flew away.

"Look, kid, we could clearly blow the dude out of the sky," Johnny said. "But we're out of his firing range now — and unless he puts us in mortal danger, I'm not going to waste time attacking him. Now let's get out of here. Set us on a general north-by-northeast course. I'll calculate the specifics."

Chip obeyed, pressing buttons and flipping levers. At the same time, Johnny checked his altimeter and his compass. He pulled a map from under his seat, where General Dennis had stashed it with a thick red booklet entitled *Yttrmchsz in Seven Hundred Easy Lessons*.

With taut concentration, Johnny examined the map, then programmed some coordinates into the chopper's flight computer. "Now," he said when he was finished, "I'm going to read this Yttrmchszia manual. And if I hear one *doo-wop* in the next ten minutes, you're spending spring vacation on a tropical island — alone!"

Chip nodded. He sat silently for a few minutes, then began looking nervously at his watch.

Exactly ten minutes and one second later, he blurted out, "Doctor McGibbits?"

"Just a minute," Johnny replied.

"Okay, nothing important."

After a few moments, Johnny exhaled and closed his book. "All right, what is it?"

"Nothing… just wondering what that flashing O is."

Johnny looked up to see the O warning light on the overhead panel. His jaw dropped. "That means the oil is overheating!"

"Is that… normal?" Chip asked, panicking.

"Only when the turbo is activated for too long!" Johnny replied.

"Uh-oh."

“Don’t tell me —”

“I’m sorry,” Chip said. “I flipped it on when you said we had to get away. I was just trying to help —”

“Engine overheating!” came the computer’s electronic voice. “Prepare for crash landing!”

Johnny looked down. Below them was an isolated island, with one huge, smouldering volcano in the center. Around it, a stormy surf sent dark tidal waves crashing into the shore.

An acrid smell began seeping into the chopper's cabin. The engine sputtered and wheezed.

“We're — we're losing altitude!” Chip shouted.

“Guess I'll be joining you on that tropical vacation, kid,” Johnny replied, frantically working the controls. “Too bad we won't be alive to enjoy it!”

Game Hint

When in the heat of battle, don't allow yourself to stray too far off course. Keep an eye on the ADF.

Chapter 7

Johnny's finger jammed a button marked TURBO OVERRIDE. He pulled back on his accelerator. The chopper spun wildly to the right. Johnny felt his stomach jump as they dropped toward the volcano.

“What are you doing?” Chip cried.

“Reducing engine power,” Johnny replied “It's the only way to cut back on oil usage.”

Chip's eyes bugged out as the chopper plunged closer to the volcano. “But — but — but —” Chip stuttered.

“Great imitation!” Johnny said. “I didn't know you did sputtering engines.”

The volcano's smoke now whipped past their windshield, darkening the cabin. Johnny pushed the control stick gently forward. The chopper stopped descending, then began to hover.

Slowly Johnny guided the craft forward. They passed blindly through the gray-black smoke, neither of them saying a word.

The warning light flickered a bit, then died out. In minutes, light returned to the cabin as they pulled away from the volcano's dark cloud.

Chip sat back in his seat and sighed. “I don't care what you say. You are cool.”

“Compliment accepted,” Johnny said.

“And I promise — I'll leave the thinking to you until we get to Yttrmchszia.”

“Gee, thanks, Chip,” Johnny said dryly. He took the chopper upward, slowly increasing the speed. No attack planes were in sight now, but Johnny refused to let down his guard. There was a long way to and so far their track record left a lot to be desired.

The digital clock above the chopper's dashboard read 4:08 A.M. as they approached snow-covered Johnny cut the chopper lights to avoid being seen. The night was moonless, so he had to

rely on sonar and the lights of the town below.

Before long there were no lights below. Johnny knew what this meant: They were over the Great Central Plain. The Mad Leader's compound was on the plain's eastern edge, a cold and desolate tundra. Johnny stared at the dimly lit radar screen until a complex of seven large figures appeared. “Bingo!” he said.

There was nothing but silence from Chip's seat, then a heavy snore.

“Chip?” Johnny said. “Yo, Chip!”

“Huh?” There was a rustling noise as Chip sat up. “Ugh, I must have been sleeping!”

“I hate to ruin your beauty sleep, but we're here.”

“Yeah?” Chip looked at the radar screen, then out the window. A faint outline of the compound, ringed with lights, was coming into view. “Hey, good navigation, dude. We did it.”

Johnny pressed a button marked WHIZBANG WHISPER. The chopper fell suddenly silent.

“What happened to the engine?” Chip asked anxiously. “What'd I do?”

“Nothing, this time,” Johnny said. “I activated the Whizbang Whisper mechanism, which enables the helicopter to operate in complete silence.”

“Oh,” Chip said, sitting back in his seat.

“Right Of course. I knew that.”

“Sure you did,” Johnny replied. He carefully let the chopper descend to the tundra.

It came to a landing a few hundred yards from the compound, in a small pine forest. Johnny cut the engine, then he and Chip jumped out. Johnny grabbed his backpack from behind his seat. Then he and Chip pulled the gray guard uniforms from under the seats. Johnny examined the pockets quickly for the fake ID papers, explosives detectors, and gas grenades. They were all there, plus two small electronic gadgets that hung on their belts.

“Beepers,” Johnny said. “We can use them if we need to split up.”

They changed into the thick woolen uniforms, sending out little white puffs as they breathed the frigid Johnny slung his backpack over his shoulder, and then he and Chip began walking toward the compound. In the distance, they could see a razor-wired fence, threaded by a string of bare light bulbs. Beyond the fence were five or six low, windowless buildings made of concrete. “Luxurious set-up, huh?” Chip remarked.

“You were expecting Disneyland?” Johnny said.

They approached the gate, which had a sign marked ENTRANCE B. Two grim-faced guards in heavy maroon-colored uniforms paced back and forth in front.

“Wait a minute,” Johnny whispered, pulling Chip behind a clump of tall bushes. “Their uniforms are a different color.”

Chip peered through the branches. “Great. How could General Dennis have made such a dumb mistake?”

“Maybe he didn't,” Johnny answered. “It could be that they just switch to different types of uniforms once in while.”

“To fake out people like us,” Chip said.

“You got it,” Johnny replied. “Let's just hope our ID papers work — they're our only hope.”

“What's our alibi if they ask about the uniforms?”

Johnny thought for a minute. “We were on a long-term secret mission that began when the old uniforms were being used.”

Chip looked skeptical. “I don't know… if it doesn't work, we're in big trouble

“You're right. We'll split up — if there's an Entrance B, then there must be an Entrance A. Chances are one of us will talk his way in, then he can go get the other. I'll find the other entrance, you take this one. Use the beeper if you get into trouble.”

“Um, one problem, Jimbo-B — I mean, Doctor McGibbits. What'll you do when they start talking Yttrmchsz?”

Johnny glowered at him. “I studied the manual, remember?”

“But only for a few minutes!”

“That's all I needed.”

Chip grinned broadly. “Cool.”

Johnny sprang from behind the bush and ran around the barbed-wire fence. Sure enough, there was another gate about seventy yards to the west of the first. A broad-shouldered guard with a scar on his forehead yawned loudly as he paced back and forth.

"*Jtvfd!*" Johnny said, using the Yttrmchsz word for hello.

The guard looked him up and down with narrowed eyes. "Where are your papers?" he said in Yttrmchsz.

Johnny understood the question. He pulled out his papers and gave them to the guard, who looked closely at every page.

"What are you doing in the old uniform?" the guard asked, again in Yttrmchsz.

Johnny's photographic memory raced through everything he'd read of the manual. He'd only gotten through four hundred thirteen of the seven hundred lessons, but that was probably plenty.

Or so he thought.

"*Mxywgt gn sth gdnskj tsk thrwsvz, rfglk wmfth rws,*" Johnny said, carefully reviewing the translation in his head: I've just returned from a long-term, secret mission.

The guards eyes widened. Johnny nodded solemnly.

Slowly the guard turned around. He lifted his hand, snapped his fingers. Another guard came running from a small, wooden shack nearby.

The first guard reached for his holster. He turned toward Johnny, his face twisted into a grimace.

And that's when Johnny pounced. He had no choice. With a diving tackle, he knocked the guard off his feet.

The guards gun clattered to the ground.

Johnny swung his leg around and kicked it away. He grabbed the guard in a tight half nelson and stood

The other guard froze, his gun aimed at Johnny's head.

"*Frtwk lkd hg tht frtwk gstrf!*" JohnnyShouted, meaning shoot me and you shoot him!

Crrrrack! Johnny's left ear tingled as a shot whizzed by it. “Are you crazy?” he shouted to the second guard, in English.

There was no answer. Suddenly another guard appeared to Johnny’s left, then another behind him. In seconds, he was facing into the barrels of a dozen firearms.

“Ready!” Came a shout in Yttrmchsz.

Johnny looked nervously around him. “Uh, guys?” He said. “There’s been a mistake.”

“Aim!”

The guards planted their feet and tightened their grips.

“*Wxs!*” Johnny shouted, using the Yttrmchsz word for no. “*Wxs!*”

“Fire!”

Chapter 8

"*Bsghz mchtr! Bsghz mchtr!*"

The voice was shouting "Cease fire! Cease fire!" It was young and high-pitched. Not the sort of voice you'd expect from an experienced soldier of the Mad Leader.

Maybe that was why the guards listened. Maybe the shouts reminded them of their sons. Maybe their surprise made them freeze up.

Whatever the reason, they put their guns down and looked in the direction of the voice.

Running toward them was Chip Conley, followed by two other guards.

Johnny exhaled. The kid was good for something, after all.

There was a flurry of talk in Yttrmchsz as Johnny's attackers grilled Chip. Chip gestured with his arms and spoke so fast that Johnny couldn't understand a word he said. The guards listened, but kept looking warily over their shoulders at Johnny.

"All right," one of them said in Yttrmchsz. "We'll let you go. But you both must switch uniforms."

Surrounded by guards, Johnny and Chip walked to a large bunker at the edge of the compound. The guards let them in, and one of them pointed to a door at the end of a long corridor. A sign on it said UNIFORM SUPPLY CLOSET in Yttrmchsz.

With a few final, gruff looks, the guards shambled out and went back to their posts.

"Guess those guys didn't like you, huh?" Chip said.

"Not everyone can be as charming as you," Johnny grumbled.

"What did you say to them?"

"I told them our alibi," Johnny said. "Same as what you told them: *Mxywgt gn sth gdnskj thrwsvz, rfglk wmfth rws* — 'I've just returned from a long term, secret mission,' "

Chip grinned. “No. You didn’t say that.”

“What do you mean? Of course I did!”

Suddenly Chip exploded with laughter. He whooped at the top of his lungs, clutching his stomach. “You should have studied the manual longer! You got a couple of things wrong.”

“Like what?”

“Well, you mixed up few letters, and botched some of the pronunciation. The way you said that, it meant roughly… let’s see… ‘I’ve just danced with a long-lipped, secret wombat.’ They must have thought you were making fun of them!”

With that, Chip fell to the floor, convulsed with laughter.

Johnny felt his jaw tighten. Silently he skulked to the supply room, trying to ignore the echoes of mocking laughter that bounced off the hallway walls.

Moments later, Johnny and Chip entered the compound's administration building through the rear door. They made their way through the hallway toward the front, to look for the compound's directory. Around them was a bustle of voices, and one sound that caught Johnny by surprise — a piano playing an old composition of his. Must be someone's radio, he thought. At least one of the Mad Leader's workers had some taste.

Johnny and Chip each wore a heavy, woolen maroon suit with R & D sewn over the front pockets-the uniform of the Mad Leader's Research & Development Department. As they walked down the main corridor, they gave snappy salutes to the guards they passed.

“Everyone here has weapons except us,” Chip whispered.

“Hey, if we'd picked guard uniforms, we'd have weapons, too,” Johnny said, “but we need these R & D uniforms to get us into the nerve gas lab.”

“If we find it,” Chip said. He began humming nervously along to the music that was still wafting through the hallway. “Weird tune,” he remarked. “Sounds like a third-grader wrote it.”

Johnny let that comment go. But he could almost feel the steam coming out of his forehead.

The music grew louder as they approached the main lobby. Johnny could see it was coming from behind a double wooden

door ahead. Beside the door was a sign that said (in Yttrmchsz):

PIANO CONCERT MANDATORY
FOR SECTION 4C WORKERS
INSPIRATIONAL MUSIC
TO IMPROVE PRODUCTIVITY
* PLAYED BY OPERATIVE NZQ–809 *

Johnny wandered over to the door.

“What are you doing?” Chip said.

“I wrote this piece,” Johnny replied, then added, “when I well past third grade.”

“Oooops… sorry…” Chip's face was red as he followed Johnny through the doors and into a small auditorium. The pianist was a blond, strong~shouldered man who looked up as they walked in.

Johnny held his backpack in his lap as they sat down among a crowd of stone-faced workers. Some of the workers were listening, some fast asleep. Suddenly the music stopped, and the pianist began playing a bizarre series of chords. Johnny hadn't heard anything so unusual in a long time.

“Nice,” Chip said uneasily. “I like your music.”

Johnny glowered at him. “It's not mine! I don't know what that is.”

An A chord, a D chord, another D, then an F, A, D, E, D…

“Wait a minute,” Johnny said. “Something’s going on here.” He grabbed a notepad and pen from his backpack and wrote down the rest of the chords as they were played: B, A, D, G, E, B, A, B, B, B, A, G, E, B, A, D, C, A, G, E, E, D, G, E, B, E, E, F, F, E, E, D.

After that, the piece ended. A few audience members applauded.

“What are you doing?” Chip asked.

“*Sshh!*” Johnny replied. “follow me.”

He ran out of the auditorium, leading Chip to a secluded side

corridor. “I think the player is one of us. This looks like some kind of a message, using music as his code.”

“ ‘Add faded badge babb age bad cage edge beef feed,’ ” Chip recited. “Maybe he doesn't know English so well.”

Johnny shook his head. “Don't forget, the notes on a music staff only go from A to G, so he had to do the best he could.”

“But what does it mean?”

Johnny folded the note and put it in his pocket. “Let's find out.”

He ran down the corridor. At the end was a small metal door. Johnny tried the knob, but it wouldn't budge.

“Great,” he said. “They locked the stage door. If I kick it in, they'll be on us in seconds.”

“No problem!” Chip said. He elbowed Johnny aside and kneeled down to look at the lock. Then he reached into his Mohawk ridge of hair and pulled out three metal pins that looked like bobby pins. Inserting them in the keyhole, he carefully twisted, pushed, jiggle…

With a tiny click, the door opened. “Ta-da!” Chip sang.

It was a neat trick, Johnny had to admit. But the only thing he said to Chip was, “Let's go.”

“You're welcome,” Chip said as Johnny rushed past him.

In a dark corner backstage, Johnny spotted an open door with a burly guard standing in front. Beyond the guard, he could see a desk with a mirror and a canvas chair. A musical score rested on the desk, and a tuxedo jacket hung on the chair.

“Excuse me, is this Operative NZQ–809's dressing room?” Johnny asked, carefully pronouncing each word in Yttrmchsz.

The guard's eyes shifted right and left. “There is no Operative NZQ–809,” he answered.

“Then may we see the man who played the piano?” Chip chimed in.

“Go away,” the guard retorted. “He has been voided.”

“Voided?” Chip repeated. “For what?”

The guard glared at him angrily. “For deviating from the musical program without reason, for playing subversive and unauthorized music.”

Chip was about to protest, but Johnny pulled him away. “Thank you,” he called over his shoulder to the guard.

Back in the hallway, Chip was red-faced with anger and disbelief. “They killed him just for that?”

“Or expelled him, or wiped his memory out,” Johnny said. “ ‘Voided' could mean any of those things. In a totalitarian state, language can get distorted.”

“Especially if it’s Yttrmchsz,” Chip added.

“Let's find the nerve gas center,” Johnny said. “We'll worry about the message later.”

They made their way to the lobby, where there was a large, glassed-in map of the compound. The buildings were arranged like a wheel — a round one in the center like a hubcap; and six others around it, pointing outward like spokes. The six outer buildings were labeled ADMINISTRATION, WAREHOUSE, BARRACKS, TRAINING, MUNITIONS, and OPERATIONS. The middle building was labeled R & D CENTER.

Quickly they walked out the rear of the administration building and across the cement courtyard to the R & D center. By the front door was a card slot with a small red light above it.

“Oh, good,” Chip said, “a cash machine. I'm running low.”

Johnny raised an eyebrow. “Just what I need — a stand-up comedian. If you can get serious for a second, we have to figure out how to get in here.”

“No problem,” Chip said. He pulled a silver-colored plastic card from his pocket. “This ought to do the trick.”

“How — what —” Johnny sputtered.

Chip inserted the card in the slot. “Locks aren't the only things I pick,” he said with a grin as the door let out an electronic buzz. “I'm pretty good at pockets, too. You see, there was this guy in the lobby, and the card was in his side pocket, just asking to be stolen —”

Chip pushed the door open, and his words caught in his

throat. Johnny caught a faint chemical smell, which tore up through his nose like a knife. He tried to pull his partner away.

But it was too late. The next moment, he and Chip both crumbled to the ground!

Chapter 9

Johnny tried to sit up, but the pain was too great. His head felt as if it were caught in vise. His breathing was so loud it startled him. Slowly he opened his eyes.

A blurry mirage swam around him, surrounded by a black rectangle. He blinked and shook his head. Three giant, dark forms were taking shape, peering down at him from above. Each had goggle eyes and a long, elephantlike trunk.

“Are you all right?” one of them asked in Yttrmchsz.

Johnny sat bolt upright. It suddenly became clear. The three men were wearing gas masks — and so was he. The men must have put it on him while he was unconscious. He looked around to see Chip, also masked, picking himself up from the floor.

“What happened?” Johnny demanded, concentrating to make sure his Yttrmchsz was correct.

“Sorry,” came a muffled voice from one of the three men, “there was a major leak in one of the labs. We were just about to seal off this entrance.” He shrugged. “We sealed all the other entrances, but this was last —”

Johnny thought fast. “I suppose the three of you went to each entrance together!” he said in an indignant voice. “You couldn't have split up? Or would that have been too easy?”

The man looked at his partners. “But —”

“But nothing!” Johnny said. “We are — are —” He tried to remember the Yttrmchsz word for inspectors, but he couldn't think of it.

Chip spoke right up. “We're from the quality control department. Obviously we have a lot of work to do here!”

It was hard to see the three men's faces behind their masks, but Johnny could tell they were nervous. “Of course, sir,” the middle one said. “Come right in. Our crew is working on the leak. We've got the exhaust on full blast and it should only be moments

before —”

Johnny and Chip swept right by them, into a large, circular room. Johnny cast a quick glance upward. The building rose five stories high, and at each floor there was a balcony full of scurrying workers. Warning lights flashed the words SYSTEM LEAK all over.

“Who is responsible for this?” Johnny demanded.

“Group XJ, sir,” answered one of the men. “They're in the neutralizer lab.”

“Where is that?” Johnny asked.

“Third floor, sir,” the man answered.

“And the vat of nerve gas acid?” Johnny pressed.

“The basement,” the man said. “Is there any way we can help?”

“Yes,” Johnny replied. “Stay here!”

With that, he led Chip into an elevator and pressed 3.

“That was great!” Chip said as the door closed. “You had me scared.”

“The trick,” Johnny answered with a smile, “is to sound like you know what you're talking about.”

As they stepped out, a booming voice called over a loudspeaker, “Attention all personnel. The gas-leak emergency is over. You may remove masks.”

“About time,” Johnny said as he and Chip took off their masks. “Let's hold on to them, just in case.”

They hooked the masks onto their belts and walked down the third-floor balcony. Like the other balconies, it was a long, circular hallway. On their right, Johnny and Chip could look down into the central area. On the wall to their left, there were doors every few feet.

The fourth door had a placard that said NEUTRALIZER DEVELOPMENT. Johnny pushed it open and called out, “Quality control inspectors. Please clear the room.”

Five workers dropped what they were doing and left.

Chip watched them leave, then burst out laughing. “This is a

piece of cake!”

“They'll be back,” Johnny said. “Let's move!”

Despite air-conditioning, there was a chemical odor in the room. It was a large, wedge-shaped office with a door in back that led to the next room. Black tabletops along each wall were crowded with computers and lab machines. Test tubes, clustered in enormous racks, bubbled and fizzed.

Each item, no matter how small, was marked with the jagged triangular symbol of the Mad Leader.

Johnny went straight over to a table on the far end of the room. On it were four 55-gallon vats, filled with hissing chemicals. The Mad Leader's insignia was on the side of each, in the form of a small steel plate bolted to the vat.

“He's got to have his name on everything,” Johnny remarked. “An egomaniac.”

“Did you ever wish you could meet him?” Chip asked.

“If I did meet him, I'd be the first. The guy's never shown his face in public.” Johnny leaned close to the first vat and read some fine print under the insignia: “ ‘Experimental neutralyzer A.’ ”

“And B, and C, and D,” Chip said, reading the others.

“Chances are one of these chemicals will neutralize the nerve gas acid — maybe all of them will.”

“Great! So we'll just take samples, find the acid, then dump all the samples into it.”

“Too risky,” Johnny said. “First, we may not be able to tell on sight if the neutralizer is working. Second, there may be a reaction among the neutralizers themselves if we put them in all together. Third, what if one of these is a decoy against people like us? What if it actually releases the gas? The point is, we have to test them all first.” He took his chemical analyzer kit from his pocket. “We'll analyze a sample of each, then take some with us. When we get to the nerve gas acid, we'll analyze that. By looking at all the chemical compositions, I'll know which neutralizer to put in.”

“Whatever you say,” Chip said, looking around nervously. “But it sounds kind of... involved to me.”

“If you can think of a better way, let me know.” Johnny

opened the kit and began unscrewing the vial of blue liquid. A foul odor filled the room.

Chip took a whiff. “Mmmm, spring is in the air.”

Whaccckk!

A sudden slam of the door made them both turn around. Standing in the doorway was a man whose head almost touched the top of the door frame. Sewn over his shirt pocket was the name XXX–1. His hands were the size of meat hooks and his chest swelled like a barrel when he spoke.

He spoke only two words:

“Imposters die!”

Chapter 10

“Fine, thanks,” Johnny said. “And how are you?”

With a clomping of heavy boots, XXX–1 stepped angrily into the room. “Quality control department?” he growled. “There is no quality control department here.”

“I thought so!” Johnny said.

XXX–1's arms rippled as he reached out for Johnny. Behind him were five other goons, equally angry.

Johnny whirled around. With one hand, he grabbed two of the neutralizer vials. “Take the other vials and follow me,” he said to Chip. “And hold your breath!”

Chip obeyed, his hands shaking.

Johnny quickly eyed the room's rear door. With his free hand, he reached for his belt. As he turned back to his attackers, he ripped off a gas grenade and pulled the ring. XXX–1's beefy, outstretched hand was inches from Johnny's arm.

“Here,” Johnny said calmly. “Hold this.”

He put the grenade in the goon's hand.

There were a few screams, a lot of cursing in Yttrmchsz. But Johnny didn't stick around to listen. In seconds, he and Chip were out the rear door.

They heard the hiss of the tear gas, and violent coughing. But by that time they were in the hallway, racing toward the nearest set of stairs.

“What now?” Chip called out.

“The basement!” Johnny answered. “That's where the nerve gas is!”

Their footfalls echoed hollowly as they sped down the metal stairs.

Reooo-reooo-reooo-reooo!

A shrill alarm echoed through the building. Workers stopped

and looked around. A team of goons appeared on the first floor.

“Stop running!” Johnny ordered his assistant.

Chip looked at him as if he were crazy. “But we're only on the second floor — and they're after us!”

Out of the corner of his eye, Johnny could see XXX–1 emerging from the neutralizer room. He was trying to say something, but couldn't get any words out between fits of coughing.

“Throw some grenades!” Johnny said to Chip.

Chip fumbled for his belt. “Where?” Chip asked.

In answer, Johnny threw two of his grenades high into the air above the main room. They exploded in a cloud of tear gas. “Gas leak!” Johnny shouted over the balcony.

Chip quickly threw his grenades, then followed Johnny down the stairs. Around them, workers were all running for cover. Johnny and Chip quickly donned their gas masks.

They scuttered to the first floor, then burst through a solid, metal, gasproof door that led to the basement. As the two of them raced downstairs, the door shut behind them. The siren became a muffled whine.

Johnny took off his mask. The air was clear, and he nodded to Chip. As Chip yanked his own mask off, Johnny looked around. There were no hallways, no doors, no balconies. Just one dark, cavernous room with a metal vat in the middle, surrounded by a wall of Plexiglas. The vat was closed tightly but still gave out a steady *hisssssssss*.

“Come on, they'll be after us the minute XXX–1 stops coughing,” Johnny said.

There was only one door in the Plexiglas wall, and it was shut tight with a combination lock.

“I'll get some sort of battering ram,” Johnny said.

“Nah, too primitive,” Chip said. He rubbed his hands together, knelt by the lock, and listened to it carefully as he turned the dial.

Click.

Chip stood up. He solemnly pulled the door open and gestured

for Johnny to enter.

As Johnny rushed past Chip, he shook his head. “How do you do that?”

“Trade secret,” Chip replied with an impish grin.

Johnny raced to the vat. He could see a tiny sign filled with instructions in Yttrmchsz, attached to the vat right underneath the familiar steel triangular symbol of the Mad Leader. Johnny knew that trying to read the sign would be a waste of time — the Mad Leader's goons would be down any second.

“Okay,” he said, “let's neutralize this baby!”

The vat's lid was sealed tightly, kept in place via a huge steel lever. Johnny wrapped his hands around the lever and pulled.

The sound was deafening. It was between a hiss and a roar. It reminded Johnny of a stormy surf crashing on the rocks. Suddenly acid spat out of the top. It caught the edge of Johnny's shirt and he jumped away, nearly dropping the two vials he was holding. With a tiny *ssssss*, an inch of the shirt disintegrated instantly.

He placed the vials on the floor and reached for his chemical analyzer kit. “Back off!” he shouted to Chip, who was still reading the sign on the vat.

Chip scrambled away from the vat, and barely missed being hit by a spurt of acid. His eyes were wide with shock. “Forget about that kit!” he yelled.

“I'll do the thinking here, remember?” Johnny snapped.

With a forceful thrust of his arm, Chip knocked the kit out of Johnny’s hand. “That sign!” he said, his voice practically a shriek. “It's a warning! It says if the acid is exposed to air, it explodes in ten seconds!”

Game Hint

During the flight stage, always take the initiative when communicating with the enemy. When you see an enemy jet, switch to the communications system and request ID.

Chapter 11

Johnny froze. He had felt a rush of anger toward Chip, but that disappeared. Emotions didn't count now. Only one thing did. Survival.

There was no time to test. He'd have to dump one of the vials in. But which one? And even if he did choose the right one, would there be enough of it to neutralize the acid?

Johnny's mind raced. Inches from him, Chip was quivering, his skin pale and clammy from worry. The spurting acid was hissing in a steady rhythm. He grabbed his two vials in one hand, Chip's two vials in the other. They all looked the same; right down to the triangular metal insignia of the Mad Leader.

“Doctor McGibbits, do something!” Chip cried out.

Suddenly a tune came into his head — the piano melody played by the spy they had never met. There was something in that message, Johnny remembered, something about a…

A–D–D F–A–D–E–D B–A–D–G–E.

Johnny's eyes were fixed on the vials. They weren't alike, not exactly. One of them looked older than the others, or maybe there had been an acid spill on it. The Mad Leader's triangular steel symbol, attached to the side of the vial, looked worn and old.

Faded.

Add faded badge.

A strange cry caught in Johnny's throat. A cry of shock, of triumph, of fear that it might be too late.

His arms, his hands, his legs, moved so fast he wasn't even aware of them. In one fluid motion he ripped the stopper off the vial with the worn-out symbol and dumped its contents into the vat.

“Two seconds!” Chip shouted.

Johnny held his breath. The amount of liquid in the vial seemed so puny compared to what was in the vat. He wasn't

feeling optimistic.

SSSSSSSSSssssss…

The hiss became a fizzle, then silence.

A droplet of sweat fell from Johnny's brow. He looked at Chip. His face was sweating, too, and ghostly white.

“You look terrible,” Chip said faintly.

For some reason, Johnny thought that was funny. He tried to fight the urge to chuckle, but he couldn't. Relief washed over him, making him feel almost silly. A laugh practically exploded out of his mouth.

“He's human, folks!” Chip said. “Johnny McGibbits has a sense of humor!”

When Chip started laughing, it only made things worse. Johnny couldn't stop himself. He felt like a child, but he felt good. The mission was accomplished, the gas was deactivated. Now all they needed to do was get out of there.

Reooo-reooo-reooo-reooo!

The siren stopped their laughter cold. Johnny and Chip sprang to their feet and ran for the door.

Before they could get there, the door swung open by itself. It crashed against the inner wall with a loud, hollow bang.

They both pulled up short. There was something standing in the door, something large.

It was shaped like a human, but made of steel. Its eyes were small light sensors that were focused on Johnny. Its arms were powerful lasers, surrounded by bayonetlike claws.

There was a strange, evil grin on its face. As it rolled toward them, the hinges of its mouth slowly opened.

Like a nest of snakes, a tangle of black steel-reinforced rope shot out of the mouth. In seconds, the rope flew around Johnny and Chip, binding their bodies tight!

Chapter 12

The ropes cut into Johnny's arms. He struggled but couldn't move. The robot approached, brandishing its lasers.

“Die, intruders!” its mechanical voice said.

“Last time we were imposters,” Chip said.

Johnny grimaced at the robot. “Who writes the material for you guys?”

There was no answer. Instead, the rope tightened. Chip fell to the ground with a yelp of pain.

Johnny dug his heels in. He stayed upright, but his feet were sliding inch-by-inch toward the robot.

“You're supposed to do the thinking!” Chip shouted. “Think!”

“Gotta… get… my hands… free,” Johnny said through clenched teeth.

The robot's arms were growing longer, extending outward, opening wide.

“Oh, great!” Chip said. “It wants to hug us!”

Johnny and Chip were inches away now. With a solid clank, the robot's hands clamped together behind their backs.

Then, slowly, the arms began to pull Johnny and Chip inward, squeezing them against the robot itself.

“I told you! I told you!” Chip yelled.

“At least he's not using his bayonets,” Johnny remarked.

“That's a real comfort!” Chip said.

Johnny felt the wind being crushed out of him. His heavy breathing made damp circles on the robot's side. Inches away, just to the right of Johnny's mouth, a control board beeped rhythmically.

He felt a rush of hope. If he could reach the controls with his chin, he might be able to do something. He stretched his neck,

wriggled his head. The robot was holding tight, suffocating him. Johnny's vision began

playing tricks. Forms and shapes seemed to dance frantically. It looked as if something human was moving through the room, but Johnny couldn't focus. He stretched his neck one last time, while his lungs still had the tiniest pocket of air…

“Oof!” Without warning, Johnny fell to the ground.

Beside him, Chip landed in a heap. They both lay there, their ropes heaving out and in as they gulped air. The alarm had stopped, and in the eerie silence their breathing sounded like two hacksaws.

Johnny was only dimly aware of something crouching beside the robot. He blinked and shook his head. As his eyesight cleared, he made out the shape of a man.

The stranger was poking and twisting with a screwdriver and pliers. Sparks flew from the robot, then it finally went dead.

The man sat back. He was balding, but had a thick, black beard with flecks of gray in it. Despite his baggy maroon uniform, he looked muscular and athletic. When he turned to Johnny, he didn't have the scowl that seemed to be on everyone else's face in the compound. In fact, he was smiling.

“*Jtvfd!*” he said. Then he switched to English. “Or should I say, ‘hello’? ”

Johnny's eyes were slitted with suspicion. “Who are you?”

“I am the owl,” the man said. “I've got the mince.”

Johnny nodded. “I'm the pussycat. I've got the quince.”

“And I've got the runcible spoon,” the man replied.

“And I think you guys are both nut cases!” Chip shouted. “Get me out of here!”

The man laughed. Taking a knife from his pocket, he began cutting Johnny's ropes. “It's okay, kid, I'm one of you.”

“That was a code we Infiltrators use,” Johnny added. “You know, from that old nursery rhyme by Edward Lear.”

Chip shook his head. “You gotta be kidding.”

“The Owl and the Pussycat,” the other man said. “You

probably learned it in kindergarten."

"I must have been absent that day," Chip mumbled.

"There!" the man said, yanking Johnny's ropes off. "By the way, my Yttrmchszian name is PDL–796, but back home in Nebraska they call me Zeke."

With Johnny's help, Zeke freed Chip in seconds. "Well, maybe you'll be able to go back to Nebraska now, Zeke," Johnny said triumphantly. "We're all going home. I neutralized the nerve gas supply!"

"We neutralized the nerve gas supply," Chip corrected.

"I've got news for you," Zeke said. "None of us is going home just yet." He looked right and left, then lowered his voice. "Not until we find Doctor Gump."

Johnny and Chip looked at him blankly, until Chip said, "Is this some kind of code, too? 'I'm Doctor Gump, I've got the pump'?"

"Doctor Phineas Gump," Zeke replied, without a trace of a smile, "is the world's foremost olfactorologist."

"Right," Chip said. "Meaning…?"

"Meaning an expert in the science of smell," Zeke explained. "He's at the forefront in the development of home-access smell-o-vision — with a touch of your remote controller, you'll be able to smell what's on your TV!"

"Big deal," Chip said. "One night I left a tunafish sandwich on my TV, and I could smell it fine the next morning."

"But Doctor Gump was kidnapped for something else," Zeke went on, ignoring the comment. "It seems that while working on a special smell-o-vision deodorant, he stumbled upon the formula for something quite extraordinary. It not only makes an object's smell disappear — but the object itself."

"So if the TV show really stinks," Chip said. "Whammo, it's history! Right?"

"Chip, " Johnny said menacingly.

"Hey, later on we can joke all we want," Zeke said. "Right now we have to find Gump and bring him home — on special

order from Brigadier General Bunson O'Shaughnessy."

" 'Old Blood 'n' Guts' himself," Johnny said.

"Yep," Zeke replied. "And I suggest we run for it. I disconnected the alarm, but you've got a few people upstairs pretty curious about exactly who you are."

Zeke sprang to his feet. With Johnny and Chip close behind, he ran around the vat and up a rear stairwell. Together they burst through a heavy metal door into the frigid afternoon.

Workers bustled across the cement courtyard. At various points, guards kept a lazy watch. No one seemed to notice Zeke, Johnny, and Chip as they walked toward the edge of the compound.

"Finding our man isn't going to be easy, Zeke said in a whisper.

"What?" Chip asked, cupping his hand to his ear.

"Put your hand down," Johnny said. "We can't look like we're telling secrets."

"No one knows exactly where Gump is," Zeke continued. "Not even the guards. You see, the Mad Leader has a habit of throwing his own people in jail for the tiniest crimes, so the location of the prison is kept a secret to prevent anyone from planning escape routes in advance. One thing we have discovered is that the jail can only be opened with its own security card—and we don't know where that card is. Any ideas?"

Johnny nodded. "I think we ought to divide the problem in two — I'll locate the jail and you guys find the card. We'll meet in the lobby of the administration building in an hour. Use your beeper if something goes wrong."

"Sounds good," Zeke said.

"Hey, wait a minute," Chip protested. "I'm supposed to be your partner."

"Our partnership was for the nerve gas mission, and that mission is over." With a shrug, Johnny turned to go. "See you."

Johnny jogged across the quadrangle. This was a new mission, and he was going to call all the shots.

It was finally beginning to feel right.

The warehouse was Johnny's first stop. It was the largest building in the compound, a likely place to hide a jail. He searched the uniform room, the electronics storage closet, the medical supply room, the munitions locker. Somewhere there had to be a clue — a map, a note, even a secret passageway.

No such luck.

He opened the food supply room and stepped inside. Shelves were crammed to the ceiling with tins of beef stew and tuna, canned hams, bags of coffee and tea, jars of mayonnaise and mustard. Johnny began feeling ridiculous. His search was leading nowhere.

He stormed into the hallway and pulled the door shut. For a moment Johnny stood in front of it, staring at the faded stenciled letters that said FEED ROOM, in Yttrmchsz.

FEED ROOM.

Why did those words stick in Johnny's mind? He couldn't figure it out. Was he hungry? Should he take a couple cans of beef stew for energy?

BEEF.

Just then the strange piano melody popped into his mind— and so did another snatch of the pianist's message:

C–A–G–E E–D–G–E B–E–E–F F–E–E–D.

That was it! He yanked the door open again. It slammed against the warehouse wall, sending up a dull echo.

He stepped around a pile of burlap bags full of rice. At the back of the room, enough Spam for a small city filled an entire wall of shelves. Johnny felt around for hidden switches. He pulled a few cans off, testing to

see if that would act as a trigger. Finally he swept his hand across, shelf by shelf.

The cans crashed to the ground, but nothing else happened. Johnny was facing a thick cement wall with empty metal shelves.

Back to the drawing board. He leaned his elbow on one of the shelves and let out a sigh of frustration.

Screeeeeeek!

Johnny felt himself moving, losing his balance. He grinned. The wall itself was turning!

“The old hidden-room-behind-the-wall trick,” he said to himself.

He gave the wall a good shove. A chill shot through him as he walked into a cold, dark chamber. There was one bare light bulb on the ceiling, at least two stories high. Mildew spotted the walls, and a rat scrambled into a corner hole. As Johnny's eyes adjusted to the dark, he saw the rusting iron bars of a jail cell—and a frail old man inside.

“Doctor Gump?” Johnny whispered.

The man's head rose in slow motion, as if it took tremendous energy to move at all. His hollow eyes peered over a bushy gray mustache, but they seemed not to see Johnny.

Johnny shuddered. Dr. Gump was so thin and weak, he seemed transparent.

“My name is Johnny McGibbits, and I'm with the CIA,” Johnny said, walking toward the jail. “I've come to free you.”

Doctor Gump didn't react. Johnny reached through the bars to touch his arm, make human contact.

His arm passed right through the old man.

“You are transparent,” Johnny said under his breath. “You're a hologram!”

Rrrrrrrrrocccckkkkkkk!

A horrendous, loud scraping noise made Johnny spin around. His eyes widened in terror.

Slowly, the wall moved toward him, blocking off the opening he'd just come through. The wall's cement crumbled as steel spikes began to sprout from it.

They were long. They were sturdy. They were razor-sharp. And they were packed so closely together that Johnny didn't stand a chance.

Chapter 13

There was no place to go, except into the jail itself. But even that was impossible, without a security card.

The wall was picking up speed. The tips of the spikes glinted weakly in the dull light. Johnny grabbed his beeper and sent out a signal, but he knew it was a waste of time.

Johnny hadn't lived this long to end it all as a human shish kebab for the Mad Leader. He whirled around and grabbed the bars of the gate. Grunting with frustration, he shook as hard as he could.

With a gentle click, the gate swung open.

No muss, no fuss.

There was no time to be surprised. Johnny jumped into the cell without thinking twice.

The gate slammed shut behind him. He turned around and grabbed the bars. He shook again, but this time the gate was locked.

The wall of spikes slowed to a complete stop. Then, with the same loud scraping noise, it began to retract.

Johnny's relief turned to anger. He hadn't saved himself at all — he had been tricked, forced into the jail.

"I don't believe this!" he muttered, kicking the bars of the cell. A giant clang rang out as the steel tipped toe of his boot made contact.

"Ohhhh," came a tiny voice behind him.

Johnny spun around again. In a dark corner of the cell, he could see something move — a shadow, a lump. He walked closer. The shadow became clearer. There was a head, a body, a pair of legs.

It flopped on its side, revealing a craggy face with a gray mustache. Johnny recognized it immediately — it was the face on the hologram.

“Doctor Gump!” he called out, running to the old man's side.

Gently Johnny propped him up on the cell wall. The man's head rolled to one side. His eyes flickered a few times, then closed. He mumbled something that Johnny couldn't make out.

“Doctor Gump, can you see me?” Johnny said, lifted the old man's head. “Doctor Gump?”

A clattering of footsteps broke the silence. Johnny pulse raced. If the Mad Leader's men showed up, they might open the cell to see what happened. Johnny could spring out of the darkness and escape — it was his only hope. He curled up next to Dr. Gump, hiding in the shadows.

Two dark figures entered the room. They stepped in slowly, looking around.

“Doctor McGibbits?”

Johnny sighed with relief. “Hello, Chip,” he said.

Chip and Zeke stepped into the light. Grinning widely, Chip held up a plastic card. “Hey, why so glum, chum? We found the security card!”

Zeke narrowed his eyes and came up to the cell bars. “Is that…?”

“Doctor Gump? Yes,” Johnny replied. “As far as I can tell. Although he's not too talkative right now.”

From the shadow there came a rustling sound. Johnny looked over his shoulder to see Dr. Gump struggling to sit up. “Zeke,” the old man said. “Zeke Babbage…”

The gate buzzed as Chip inserted the security card. It swung open easily.

“Yes, Phineas,” Zeke said with a chuckle. “Here I am at last.”

As Chip and Zeke walked into the cell, Johnny froze. At first he didn't understand why. He should have felt relieved. Instead, his muscles were tensing. Something wasn't right.

Zeke was coming closer now. He was smiling at Dr. Gump but his eyes were darting toward Johnny.

As a spy, Johnny lived by a few rules. Number One was *Don't trust anyone*. Number Two: *Trust your instincts*.

He thought of Number Two as his mind began to play the strange piano melody again.

And he thought of Number One as some words from the pianist's message popped into his head — the words that still remained a mystery: B–A–B–B–A–G–E B–A–D.

Babbage bad.

Zeke Babbage held out his right hand to Dr. Gump. “Hello, Phineas,” he said quietly. “Nice to finally see you again.”

Slowly, casually, Zeke's left hand was moving to the holster on his belt.

Chapter 14

Johnny lunged. With one hand, he knocked the laser gun from Zeke's holster. With his other hand, he shoved Zeke aside.

There was a dull thud as Zeke's back made contact with the cement.

Chip ran toward them. “What are you doing?” he cried out.

Johnny and Zeke dove for the gun. They collided in midair, rolling off in opposite directions.

“He's gone crazy!” Zeke yelled. “Hold him back!”

“Don't listen to him!” Johnny commanded.

They both lurched toward the gun again, but Chip beat them to it.

Shaking, Chip clutched the gun and backed away. “Look, I don't know what's going on here, but —”

Johnny sprang to his feet, followed by Zeke. “He's a double agent!” Johnny said, slowly approaching Chip. “He wants to trap us here.”

His hands shaking, Chip swung the gun from Johnny to Zeke. Both stopped in their tracks.

“Chip, don't be foolish,” Zeke pleaded. “The Mad Leader is distorting Johnny's mind.”

“How can I believe you?” Chip said.

“Look at Doctor Gump,” Zeke replied. “That's what Johnny will be like in a matter of hours. An evil mind-control gas is being released into the cell. Johnny's in the first stage — uncontrolled paranoia. Doctor Gump is in an advanced stage. We've got to get them both out.”

Chip pointed the gun at Johnny. “Doctor McGibbits? Is — is that true?”

With the attention drawn away from him, Zeke pounced. He grabbed the gun out of Chip's hand and ran to Dr. Gump. Throwing

one arm around the old man's frail neck, Zeke stood behind him and held the gun to his head. “All right, guys, let's trade places,” Zeke commanded. “You walk slowly to the back of the cell with your hands in the air, or Doctor Gump is history.”

Chip's eyes were wide with fear and embarrassment. He looked up at Johnny, unsure what to do.

“Listen to him,” Johnny advised.

This time Chip obeyed. As the two of them backed into the shadow, Johnny's mind raced. He tried to think of a way to distract Zeke, get him away from Dr. Gump. There was still a gas grenade left, and —

“I saw the grenades,” Zeke said, as if he were reading Johnny's mind. He was at the gate now, and he grabbed the door and pushed Dr. Gump behind him. “And if I see your hands fall an inch —”

The next word that came out of his mouth was halfway between a grunt and a wheeze. His jaw dropped open and his eyes rolled back. With a sudden, strangled cough, Zeke fell to his knees.

Two gnarled, pasty white fingers were pinching his neck.

Dr. Gump's fingers.

When Zeke collapsed to the floor, the old man released his pinch hold. He stood there for a moment, flexing his hand. “Haven't had to do that in years,” he said in a thin, reedy voice. “No wonder, either. It's rough on the old arthritis.”

Johnny and Chip stared, speechless.

“Well,” Dr. Gump said, “you fellas didn't seem to be able to do anything, so I figured I'd use some old martial arts pinches I once learned. Not bad, huh?”

Chip began to stammer, “We — we thought you were —”

“A vegetable?” Dr. Gump .said. “Not quite. As soon as I saw Zeke, everything came back to me. Not long ago he was an assistant in my lab, and I entrusted him with many secrets — until I began suspecting he was a spy. Next thing I knew, he kidnapped me and brought me here.”

“So the Mad Leader has your invisibility formula?” Johnny asked.

Dr. Gump smiled. “I'm not that foolish, my friend. I never told anyone that formula. Zeke managed to steal one of my invisibility pills, hoping the Mad Leader himself could analyze it. He threw me in here and tried to force the secret out of me. But both techniques failed — I never said a word, and the Mad Leader failed to figure out the formula. The pill is sitting around in storage, as mysterious as ever.”

“We'll get it,” Johnny said. He bent down and took the laser gun from Zeke's hand. “And we'll bring you home, Doctor Gump. Let's go.”

“Not so fast,” Dr. Gump said. “If I step out of this cell, every guard in the compound will be in here in seconds.” He lowered his eyes and sighed. “They've installed the patented Aromalarm system all over the compound.”

Johnny and Chip looked at him blankly.

“The Aromalarm security device was something I invented for the federal prison system,” Dr. Gump explained. “I was working on it when Zeke kidnapped me, so he snatched the plans from under my nose. You see, everyone's body has its own chemical composition, which gives off a unique smell. No two are alike—it's like a fingerprint. Aromalarm sensors can be programmed to detect only the smells of certain people.”

“So, if a prisoner passes a sensor, an alarm will go off — but if the warden passes by, nada,” Chip said.

“Precisely,” Dr. Gump replied. “As you can see, my invention backfired on me. The Mad Leader has Aromalarm sensors all over the compound, calibrated to my own body composition. Wherever I go, I'll be followed.”

Johnny was deep in thought. “Tell me something,” he said. “Is there any time a person's chemical composition can cease to exist?”

Dr. Gump shook his head. “Only if the person himself ceased to exist.”

“In other words, disappeared?” Johnny said.

Slowly Dr. Gump's eyes lit up. “Yes, of course!”

Chip gave them both a baffled look.

“Think, Chip,” Johnny said. “It's Doctor Gump's invention

that's keeping him in jail, and it's Doctor Gump's invention that'll get him out!"

Slowly it dawned on Chip. "The invisibility pill!"

"You got it, Sherlock."

"Great," Chip said. "So now we get to go back to the lab building? We're real popular there."

"No!" Dr. Gump said. "Once, while I was pretending to be unconscious, I overheard Zeke tell another guard that the Mad Leader had given up trying to figure out the formula himself. Apparently he's storing it in the medical supply room until his men can figure out a way to get the secret out of me."

Johnny ran to the gate. "Doctor, can you handle Zeke if he wakes up?"

Dr. Gump flexed his fingers. "No problem."

"Come on, Chip!" Johnny said. They both sprinted through the wall entrance, which Zeke had left open.

Within seconds they were in the medical supply room. They tore out drawers, opened cabinets, examined jars, read labels. There were aspirins, vitamin supplements, cold and allergy pills, pain killers.

But no invisibility pill.

The last place to look was a beat-up old wooden chest of drawers in a corner. Johnny grabbed the handle and pulled, but it was locked. "I think we found it," he said, stepping aside. "Okay, expert, go to work."

Again Chip reached into his hair and pulled out bobby pins. Again he patiently inserted and twisted them.

The drawer open easily. Chip and Johnny both crouched to see what was inside.

Nothing.

Johnny felt numb. The locked drawer was the most logical place for the pill to be. If it wasn't there; there was only one thing that could have happened to it.

The invisibility pill had been stolen.

Chapter 15

Whack!

Johnny slammed the drawer in disgust. “Come on,” he said, “maybe it is in the lab.”

“Whoa! Wait a minute!” Chip said. “Let's check this baby out a little more carefully.” He opened the drawer again.

“Chip,” Johnny said, “we both saw that —”

“I'm not sure seeing is the right way to find an invisibility pill,” Chip replied. He reached into the drawer and felt around. Johnny crossed his arms and watched.

Suddenly Chip stopped moving his arm. A broad smile came across his face. He brought his thumb and forefinger together. As he lifted them up, they were separated by a fraction of an inch.

“Guess what I'm holding?” he said triumphantly. “I'll give you a hint. It's small, round, and invisible.”

“Well. Uh, good work, Chip,” Johnny said stiffly. He felt his own face turning red, and he turned away. Johnny was an Infiltrator, and an Infiltrator knew not to show his emotions.

Especially if the emotion was jealousy.

“Woo-hah!” Chip shouted. “The new kid on the block outsmarts the old pro! Who'd'a thought it?”

“Let's not waste any time,” was Johnny's only response as he stepped out the door.

Back in the jail, Dr. Gump paced impatiently. Behind him, Zeke was propped neatly against the cell wall with his hands folded, like someone who had fallen asleep in church.

“Slow down!” Dr. Gump said as Johnny ånd Chip rushed in. “If you drop that thing, you'll never find it!”

Chip carefully put the pill in Dr. Gump's hand. The old man stood there, staring at his apparently empty palm. “You know,” he said, “I haven't tested this on any living creature. I–I don't know

what it'll feel like. I don't even know if it'll work!”

Johnny nodded gravely. “I understand. If you'd like to think about it….”

“No,” Dr. Gump said with a weary sigh. “What other choice do I have?” He looked from Chip to Johnny and smiled. “Wish me luck, fellas.”

With that, he popped the pill in his mouth. For a moment, nothing happened. Then his eyes began to squint and his mouth angled into a sneer. “Yuchh,” he said, “I didn't think to flavor this thing —”

And those were the last words from Dr. Gump — at least, the visible Dr. Gump. With a popping noise, he blinked out of sight. His ragged clothing fell limply to the floor.

“Sir?” Chip said. He passed his hand through the place where the old man had been.

“Hey, watch who you're slapping!” came Dr. Gump's voice.

Chip jumped back. “It — it worked!”

“Clearly,” Johnny said. “How does it feel, Doctor?”

“A bit chilly,” Dr. Gump's voice replied. “I suggest we move as fast as possible.”

“There's snow on the ground out there, Doctor,” Johnny warned. “I'm concerned —”

Dr. Gump cut him off. “I've done field work on the biological basis of mind over matter. I can walk through hot coals with bare feet. I'm sure I can handle the snow.”

“If you say so.” Johnny turned, then looked over his shoulder. “How will we know you're with us?”

“Don't worry!” Dr. Gump replied. “I'll shout to you!”

Johnny and Chip took off. They ran through the warehouse and held the door open. As Dr. Gump passed through, he said, “I'm clear.”

Johnny led the way to the back of the warehouse. There, an empty, overgrown field led to a small forest — and beyond that, the fence to the outside world. In the middle of the field, a sign on a pole said FUTURE SITE OF NEW GRAND HEADQUARTERS in

Yttrmchsz.

Johnny sensed it would be the least-guarded area in the compound.

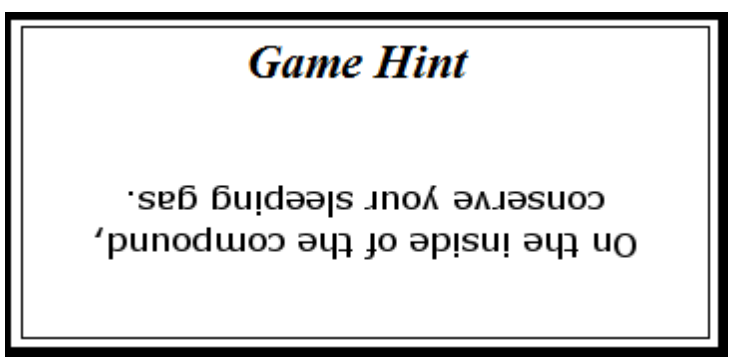
As Johnny and Chip ran into the field, Dr. Gump fell far behind. He pushed himself as hard as he could, but the weeks in prison had weakened him more than he had thought. His legs felt like lead weights. His lungs felt as if they were on fire.

Wheezing for breath, he stopped. He could see the two younger men fifty yards ahead of him, at the edge of the woods. He hoped they'd stop and wait, but they didn't.

And that's when he remembered something else he had overheard. Something about the woods around the compound. Something Johnny and Chip needed to know — right now.

He panicked. The wind was blowing toward him; Johnny would never hear his thin, tired voice. Cupping his hand to his mouth, he called out as loud as he could, “Watch out for the land mines!”

His heart sank as Johnny and Chip disappeared behind a grove of pine trees.



Chapter 16

Johnny stopped short.

Behind him, Chip was running at top speed, his head down. He plowed into Johnny from behind.

“Hey, what happened to your brake lights?” Chip said.

“Sorry,” Johnny replied. “I was thinking about criminal logic.”

“And that made you stop?”

“Imagine you're the Mad Leader,” Johnny said. “You have this large area sitting at the edge of your compound that isn't being used yet. You don't want to waste too much valuable personnel guarding it. You could cut down the trees, but you probably need them for camouflage. What do you do?”

Chip shrugged. “Import a family of lions to live in the woods?”

“They'd freeze to death.” Johnny reached into his pocket and pulled out his miniature explosives detector. “I'd make sure whoever walked through here would get blown up automatically.”

“You would?” Chip said.

“If I were the Mad Leader.” Johnny flicked the ON switch and walked slowly forward, passing the detector over the ground.

Dit-dit-dit-dit-dit-dit-dit-dit-dit…

“Just as I thought,” Johnny said. “The place is loaded with land mines. You two follow me, single file.”

“Right,” Chip answered.

Johnny waited for Dr. Gump to reply, but heard nothing. “Okay, Doctor?” he said.

Silence again.

Chip turned around and squinted. “Can't see him,” he said with a sly grin.

“I think I can,” Johnny said, looking back over the field. The wind was gently bending the grasses away from them — except for

a small patch in the middle, which seemed to be twitching.

Johnny ran back toward the patch. “Doctor Gump, is that you?”

“You're in one piece,” came Dr. Gump's reply. “I didn't think you heard me yelling.”

“I didn't,” Johnny said sheepishly.

“We can't go through those woods,” Dr. Gump quickly added. “They're full of —”

“Land mines,” Johnny interrupted. “I know. I've got a detector. Stay between me and Chip, and we'll get through, I promise.”

Johnny was right. The three of them slowly made their way through the forest, adjusting whenever the detector started to beep. They swerved and snaked, reaching the fence in less then a half hour.

A tight coil of razor-wire ran along the top of the fence. Johnny looked to the right and saw a locked gate marked ENTRANCE F. Beside it was a guard booth.

They tiptoed to the booth and looked inside. A burly uniformed guard sat in a metal chair. Only his beard stubble was visible beneath the cap that lay over half his face.

“Fast asleep,” Johnny said.

“Let me go in,” Dr. Gump said. “I'll get his security card, and I guarantee he won't see me.”

“Okay, but be careful,” Johnny advised.

He and Chip crouched by a side window and watched. The booth door opened slowly. A few seconds later, the guard's front right pants pocket began to move. A plastic card made its way up from the bottom of the pocket, then jerked out and hung in midair.

“Huh — wha —?” The guard sprang out of the seat. His cap flew off and he looked wildly around.

“Uh, pardon me,” came Dr. Gump's voice. “You don't happen to have a spare parka, do you?”

The guard's eyes bugged out. He backed away, stumbling over his chair. Then he saw the card.

“Yeeeaaaaagh!” Screaming, he bolted out the door. Johnny and Chip choked back laughter as they watched the guard run a zigzagged path near the edge of the woods.

“What about the mines?” Chip asked.

“He must know a mine-free path,” Johnny said. “Otherwise he wouldn't have been able to get out here.”

Chink!

They looked over to see the gate swinging open. Next to it, hanging in the air by itself, was a thick down coat with the Mad Leader's insignia on it.

“I hope you don't mind,” Dr. Gump said. “It's colder than I expected. I never was terribly good at that mind-over-matter nonsense.”

Johnny and Chip ran through the gate. Keeping Dr. Gump between them, they took a wide path around the compound. Before long they entered a small pine forest.

There, gleaming in the afternoon sun, was the Gizmo DHX–1 Attack Chopper. They hopped aboard, Dr. Gump in the passenger seat and Chip huddled behind him. Johnny started the engine in the whisper mode.

As the chopper lifted into the air, Chip leaned forward. “Doctor Gump,” he said, “do you like fifties music?”

The coat turned around. “Pardon me?”

“CHIP!” Johnny barked.

Chip whooped with laughter. Stonefaced, Johnny concentrated on the controls. But as the helicopter swept across the Great Central Yttrmchszian Plain, away from the compound, it was hard not to feel like shouting with joy.

A smile began to creep across Johnny's face. For a fleeting moment, he even had the urge to turn on Chip's CD.

But he was stopped by a voice that crackled over the chopper's speaker:

“Come in, DHX–1. This is General Dennis!”

Johnny grabbed the mike. “Steve, it's Johnny!” he shouted. “We're on our way!”

“Jimbo!” Dennis exclaimed. “You're there! Listen, pal, we have a Code Five Emergency — top national security. You're to drop Gump off at the American military base in Godinsk and turn back around.”

“I'm not sure I read you,” Johnny replied. “Sounded like you said, ‘Turn around.’ ”

“You're reading me clear!” Dennis said. “Our buddy the Mad Leader went nuts when he found out what you guys did. Turns out he's got a huge stash of nuclear missiles — and he's about to launch them!”

Chapter 17

Godinsk was a tiny, landlocked country several hundred kilometers west of Yttrmchszia. Johnny his chopper down at the American military base there. Around them, ten-foot-high piles of plowed snow made the tarmac look like a valley among mountains.

A dozen or so Air Force personnel were waiting, their faces grim and stony. As three of them ran to the passenger side of the helicopter, Dr. Gump handed Johnny the security card he'd smuggled from the guard. “Here,” he said, “you'll need this.”

Johnny's brow was creased with concern. “Doctor, what happens to you now?”

“Not to worry, Johnny,” he answered. “I've got an antidote in my lab back home. It will make me visible again. You fellows worry about the Mad Leader. I'll be waiting to hear how it goes.” He opened his door. Below him, the Air Force people were gawking. “Oh… and thanks, friend.”

Even though Dr. Gump was invisible, Johnny thought he could see a smile.

Another time, another day, the sight of three military officers escorting a down coat away from the helicopter would have been funny. But right now Johnny saw no humor — not with the most important mission, in his life in front of him. “Here we go again, Chip,” he said, pulling back the throttle.

An hour — that's how much time General Dennis had said they had. One hour before the Mad Leader set in motion his plan to bomb the world's great resorts — Aruba, the Great Barrier Reef, Key West, Algonquin Park, the Baltic Sea, and Dover. One hour for Johnny and Chip to go back to Yttrmchszia, deactivate the nuclear bombs, and destroy the complex. The CIA had finally been given the word — it was curtains for

the Mad Leader.

Using turbo speed, they reached Yttrmchszia in twenty-five

minutes. Johnny brought the chopper down in the same spot in the pine forest. The Entrance F guardhouse was still empty, so they used Dr. Gump's security card to slip in. Johnny's metal detector got them through the woods, and they sprinted across the field to the warehouse.

There, they stopped to catch their breath. Johnny looked at his watch. “Exactly twenty minutes left,” he said.

“You're making me nervous,” Chip said. “I should have stayed with Doctor Gump.”

“No,” Johnny said. “I need you.”

“You do?” Chip replied, his face lighting up.

“We've got to find out where they've hidden the bombs,” Johnny said, “and I'm sure the information isn't posted on the community bulletin board. Which means breaking into their computer records in the executive offices — pronto.”

“Hey, I'm there,” Chip said. Together he and Johnny ran around the warehouse. They slowed down when they got to the courtyard, careful not to draw attention to themselves. Johnny noticed a flurry of activity around the operations building. He had to do a double take — it was the first time he saw happy expressions on the workers' faces, heard joy in their voices.

“Looks like a holiday over there,” Chip said.

“They're preparing the attack,” Johnny said. “I guess that's the kind of thing that gives them their jollies.”

Wasting no time, Johnny and Chip went straight to the administration building. The main hallway was practically empty. To the left there was a set of dark, walnut-paneled doors that said EXECUTIVE OFFICES.

“If we're lucky,” Johnny said, “they’ll all be at the launching party.”

They weren't lucky. Just inside the doors was an inner office where three workers sat hunched in front of computers. They all looked up as Johnny and Chip walked in.

Immediately Chip asked in Yttrmchsz, “Has much data been destroyed yet?”

Three blank stares answered his question.

“The virus!” Chip said, trying to sound exasperated. “Has the virus affected much of your data yet?”

The workers exchanged bewildered looks. One of them, a red-haired woman with a name tag that said BHW–23, said, “Sir, I don't believe I know you

“Thmswl Drstk from Computer Repair,” Chip said. “A virus has gotten loose in our system. My partner and I are on strict orders from the Mad Lea — I mean, our Leader, to find it and recover any lost information. I must ask that you leave.”

“Leave?” BHW–23 said, rising from her seat. “We have our work quotas for the day, sir. Where is your executive order?”

“I wouldn't push it if I were you,” Chip retorted. “You realize, of course, that the three of you are our prime suspects. And you know what the punishments are.”

BHW–23 swallowed. She gave Chip a hard stare, then turned to her co-workers. “Come on. We'll see about this.”

They marched out of the room, slamming the door behind.

Johnny raised his, eyebrows. “Not bad,” he said.

“The trick is to sound like you know what you're talking about,” Chip said. “I learned that from a real master.”

Johnny couldn't help but smile at the compliment. He and Chip pulled two chairs in front of one of the computers. As they sat, Chip's fingers began flying over the keyboard. “I'm not bad at this kind of stuff, either,” he said. “You mind sticking a disk in the A drive in case we need to copy anything?”

Johnny reached for the shelves and pulled out a disk from a pile that was labeled BLANK, FORMATTED MICRO–FLOPPY DISKS. As he put it in the drive, he saw that Chip had already accessed the computer's hard disk. A menu glowed on the screen:

1. FINANCIAL RECORDS
2. GEOGRAPHICAL PLAN
3. PERSONNEL FILES
4. SUPPLY ORDERS

Chip pressed 2. A master map of the compound filled the screen, divided by crisscrossing lines into twenty segments.

Johnny looked closely. The Lrngsdvrn River flowed across the northern part of the compound, through four of the map's segments. One of those segments, number eight, was labeled with many letters that pointed to different parts of the river.

“Zoom in on section eight,” Johnny said.

“Yes, sir,” Chip replied. He maneuvered an electronic mouse and kept clicking it until a blowup of section eight appeared. It was a portion of the river, covered with asterisks. At the top of the screen were the words BOMB LOCATIONS MARKED BY *.

“We got it!” Johnny said. His eyes skipped to the bottom of the screen, where there was another menu:

F1: DIRECTION

F2: DETONATION

F3: DEACTIVATION

He reached over and pressed F3. The computer hummed, and the words READING MISSILE DEACTIVATION PROGRAM. PLEASE WAIT flashed along the bottom.

“Yeah!” Chip shouted. “There's no stopping us now!”

Wham!

Johnny and Chip whirled around at the sound of the door being kicked open.

“Oh, yes, there is,” said BHW–23, standing shoulder to shoulder with two laser-toting guards.

Chapter 18

Chip sprang up from his chair. “Arrest her,” he said in Yttrmchsz.

BHW–23 looked uncomfortably at the guards. “Don't listen to them,” she said.

“Get out of this room,” grumbled one of the guards to Chip.

Chip raised an eyebrow, then looked at the guard's name tag. “Take down his name,” he said to Johnny. “I want him reported to the Leader immediately.”

Both of the guards began to squirm. Their guns, which had been pointed straight ahead, were now wavering in their hands.

Johnny sat at the computer and began typing — but not the guard's name. Instead, he instructed the computer to copy the deactivation program onto the micro floppy disk. He glanced at his watch.

Ten minutes until detonation.

Chip continued stalling. “We found the virus,” he said to the guard, “but we're not sure we can keep it from spreading. I suggest you take BHW–23 in for questioning.”

“Ask him to show you his executive order,” BHW–23 ordered the guards.

Instantly Johnny stood up, pulling the micro floppy out of the A drive. “The monitoring system shows an outage in Operations. If we don't get to it, the missiles won't deploy!”

“And all three of you can kiss your jobs good-bye,” Chip said to BHW–23 and the guards.

Johnny and Chip bolted through the door, leaving the other three in complete confusion.

By this time, the courtyard was full of maroon-uniformed people rushing to and from the operations building. Like a pair of linebackers, Johnny and Chip darted through the thick crowd. Within seconds they reached the field behind the warehouse. They

veered right, heading due north. In the middle of the forest, they found their destination.

The Lrngsdvrn River cut a wide path through the forest. It was lined on either side by a long bank of smooth, hard-packed soil.

“According to the computer, the missile silos are right under us,” Johnny said.

“That makes me feel real comfortable,” Chip said.

Johnny whipped out his electronics detector. Holding it waist level, he headed back toward the forest.

“Where are you going?” Chip said anxiously. “We have, like, two minutes!”

“One minute and thirty-one seconds,” Johnny replied, checking his watch. He walked among the trees, looking intently at the detector.

Dit-dit-dit-dit-dit-dit-dit-dit-dit...

Johnny stopped short. He passed the detector in an arc in front of him. The noise got louder as he approached a thick tree stump to his left. He knelt down, looking into a knot in the wood.

There, deep inside, was a stainless steel keyhole. “Chip!” Johnny called out. “Got any more bobby pins?”

Chip ran over, pulling pins out of his hair. He looked inside the knot, then reached in with his pins.

It had worked easily enough before, but this time his hands were shaking. “Calm down, buddy,” Johnny said.

“Easy for you to say!” Chip replied. He fumbled again, dropping one of the pins.

Cold sweat prickled Johnny's neck. The ground was beginning to rumble, sending up little whitecaps on the river. He looked at his watch — fifty-nine seconds to go. “Come on, Chip,” he said under his breath.

Click.

A small square opened up in the trunk. Under it was a panel of gauges, electrical ports, switches, and digital readouts.

One the readouts was ticking off a countdown: 0:55.

Then 0:54.

“What are we supposed to do now?” Chip asked. “Blow it up?”

“That would probably do the trick, if we had some explosives,” Johnny said. He pointed to a cable that extended up from beneath the panel and attached to a broad electrical connection near the readouts. “That cable leads from the central computer system, where loyal minions like BHW–23 can send signals to destroy parts of the world.”

“Oh, great! So we have to go back to the executive offices? We'll be shot on sight!”

“A very good point,” Johnny said. He quickly pulled off his pack and took out his notebook-sized computer and a small plastic bag. “So we'll have to set up an office of our own, I guess.”

He pulled out the micro floppy disk that he'd taken from the executive office, then inserted it in the computer's drive. “Let's face it,” he said. “This console is basically a slave. It'll do whatever it's told to do.” He took a short cable from his plastic bag, then plugged one end into the rear of his computer.

“I think I get the idea,” Chip said. Quickly he reached for the console and pulled out its cable, leaving an empty socket.

“Atta boy,” Johnny said, inserting the other end of his cable into the socket. Now he was hooked up — his computer was taking the place of the Mad Leader's: He booted up, then typed the letters A: DEACTIV. The A drive burbled for a few minutes, and a message appeared at the bottom of the screen READING MISSILE DEACTIVATION PROGRAM. PLEASE WAIT.

Despite the cold, Johnny's clothes clung to his body with sweat. His eyes glanced up at the readout.

0:44.

Forty-four seconds.

He took a deep breath. The message on the screen had disappeared. Something was about to happen.

“Here we go, ” he said under his breath. “Come on. ”

Another message appeared — and it wasn't what Johnny expected.

He and Chip could only gape at the glaring capital letters: PLEASE ENTER SECRET CODE NUMBER.

Game Hint

The helicopter is difficult to land, so make sure that your descent is as slow as possible. Check to see that your artificial horizon is perectly straight.

Chapter 19

“What the —” Johnny said, stunned.

But Chip was already at the keyboard, furiously typing. At the bottom of the screen, in a rectangular outline, Johnny could see a series of numbers stretching from left to right. He looked at the readout. “You better know what you're doing,” he said. “We've got thirty-six seconds.”

“Ssssh!” Chip hissed. His fingers pounded the keys, until finally he hit the RETURN button.

The screen went blank momentarily. Then, with lightning speed, numbers flashed by, changing too fast for Johnny to read them.

“What did you do?” Johnny asked.

“A simple assembly-language random numbers selection program,” Chip said. “It calculates how many digits are needed, then feeds them randomly into the program, testing each combination in a tiny fraction of a second.”

The readout said 0:23.

“This could take hours!” Johnny said.

“Do you have a better idea?” Chip replied.

Before Johnny could answer, his feet gave out from underneath him. He crashed to the ground. Chip fell beside him.

The earth was vibrating violently. On the other side of the river, three patches of ground erupted upward.

Three sets of thick, steel doors broke their way through the holes.

“Stage One accomplished!” barked a distant, mechanical voice from a speaker somewhere in the forest. It was followed by a faint chorus of whoops and yells from the compound.

“Why is it starting already?” Chip asked, his voice almost a scream.

“The missiles have to be in position before they're deployed!” Johnny replied.

Now the readout said 0:15.

Three more trapdoors broke through the soil. Numbers raced by on the screen. “Missiles moving to launch positions!” the mechanical voice announced.

Slowly, six gleaming steel points rose out of the trapdoors. Johnny felt his stomach knotting up.

“Beginning countdown!” the voice boomed. “Ten…”

Chip glared at the computer, his face flushed with anguish. “Come on… come on!”

“Nine…”

Johnny got up and began pacing. He couldn't look at the computer now, couldn't listen to the countdown. He had to think of an alternative plan. For Johnny McGibbits, there was always a way out. Failure wasn't in his vocabulary. Losing was something everyone else did.

Not Johnny McGibbits.

“Three…”

The numbers on the screen kept spinning, like a slot machine gone berserk.

“Johnny! What do we do now?” Chip screamed.

“Two…”

Smoke began billowing up from beneath the missiles. The sudden bursts of hot air instantly melted patches of surrounding snow.

Johnny turned to Chip. For once in his life, he didn't have an answer. For once in his life, he felt afraid and lost.

“One!”

Chapter 20

Johnny braced himself. The ground was shaking with such force, he thought the earth would open up and swallow him.

In a way, he wished it would.

Gritting his teeth, closing his eyes, he waited for the fateful word. He tried to prepare himself for the chilling announcement “Fire!” over the speaker.

Beside him, Chip was huddled tightly to the ground. Johnny thought he could see a tear struggling to fall from his eyelid.

Then, after what seemed like hours, something finally happened.

There was a loud beep from the console.

The ground stopped shaking.

Silence hung over the forest like a blanket of wet snow.

Chip picked his head up. “I – I didn't hear it.”

“Hear what?” Johnny asked.

“ ‘Fire!’ Did you?”

Johnny shook his head. “No.”

Without saying another word, they jumped up and read the computer screen:

08 19 55
CORRECT SEQUENCE SELECTED **
DEACTIVATION ABORTED **

The readout had stopped at 0:01.

Chip's eyes were as wide as baseballs. “Yeeeee-haahhhhhh!” he screamed.

Johnny felt like screaming with joy. He felt like jumping up

and down, dancing. But that wouldn't be Johnny McGibbits. Besides, their mission wasn't over yet. With a grateful smile, he put his arm around Chip's shoulder. “Nice work. Now let's finish this place off.”

They sped back through the field. In the distance, the courtyard was swarming with people. A shrill alarm pierced the air.

Johnny knew they were about to face their toughest challenge of all: destroying the Mad Leader's compound. They had no explosives, and now so many people were suspicious of them that they'd be lucky to get across the courtyard alive.

They sneaked around to the back of the munitions building, where the Mad Leader's explosives were stored. They found an emergency door, but it was bolted shut from the inside.

“Should we risk showing our face around front?” Chip asked.

Before Johnny could answer, the door swung open. Three guards emerged, clutching rifles and grenades.

“They're over there!” Johnny shouted in Yttrmchsz, pointing toward the river.

The lead guard squinted at him. “Who?”

“The traitors who sabotaged the bombs!” Chip shot back. “Hurry! We'll back you up!”

As the guards ambled into the field, Johnny and Chip ran into the building. Unlike the warehouse, there were no corridors, no small storerooms — just one enormous room crammed with weapons. Firearms and explosives were stacked in boxes, piled against walls, laid out on heavy-duty shelves.

Suddenly a voice blared over the compound's loudspeaker system:

“Attention all personnel. This is your leader speaking. Evacuate all buildings immediately. Special Security forces are to cover the outlying areas. All others gather in the center of the compound.”

The voice was high-pitched and nasal, not at all what Johnny expected.

“Sounds like a spoiled brat,” Chip said.

Quickly Johnny scanned the room. His eyes lit on a crate labeled TNT. He ran over and looked inside. There were bundles of dynamite sticks, packed tightly. Each bundle had a digital timer.

“Bingo,” Johnny said. “It'll only take a couple of these babies to flatten each building. How long do you think it'll take us?”

“Fifteen minutes?” Chip said with a shrug.

“Sounds reasonable,” Johnny replied. “We'll set all the timers for seventeen, to give us a chance to run away.”

“Isn't that cutting it close?”

“We have no choice. You heard the Mad Leader. These buildings will be evacuated in no time. He probably has some kind of plan to flush us out. And if we're the only people running around from building to building, we're sitting ducks!”

Johnny began setting the timers in one crate, Chip in another. They planted a couple of bundles in the room. Then, carrying the crates on their shoulders, they ran out the back door.

Outside, pandemonium had broken loose. People were running about, shouting, arguing. Johnny could hear snatches of conversation:

“Move, you old ox! Didn't you hear the Leader?” a young man shouted, pushing a heavyset older man.

“He wants to massacre us all, you fool,” the older man replied. “That's why he's rounding us up!”

Johnny and Chip ran past those two, in the direction of the barracks. He overheard another voice say, “I hear they've captured the traitors who stopped the bombs!”

Someone else laughed sarcastically. “Lies! Propaganda! The machinery broke down, and the Leader doesn't want to admit his incompetence!”

Good. They were all disagreeing. No one knew what to believe. Johnny knew that the confusion would help them slip by unnoticed.

He was right. All around them, people carried computer equipment, boxes of books, appliances. They were abandoning ship, trying to escape.

In the barracks, Johnny and Chip planted two bundles, one at each end. The building was completely empty, and as they ran for the door, their footsteps echoed like gunshots.

They managed to get two bundles into the training center, then the R & D center, the operations center, and the warehouse.

The last stop was the administration building. They had two bundles left. Johnny stuck one under the computers in the executive office, as Chip ran to the other side of the building.

Booom! Outside, there was a sound like a thunderclap. Johnny raced into the hallway and looked out a window. In a split second, Chip was by his side.

Booom!

This time, Johnny saw a thick steel door slamming shut in the R & D center. “He's sealing off the buildings!” Johnny said. “Those must be emergency doors.”

They both started running for the rear door.

“What's the point?” Chip said, panting.

“Maybe he knows we're around and he's trying to trap us inside. Maybe he's trying to trap his own people outside so he can punish them somehow.”

Booom!

They froze in their tracks. This time the sound wasn't from outside.

It was from directly in front of them and all around them. Thick metal slabs had slid over every door and window of the building.

Johnny swallowed hard. There was no way out.

Chapter 21

“Chip!” Johnny cried out. “You grab the —”

But Chip was already scrambling down the corridor. Johnny hoped he and his partner had had the same idea. He looked at his watch. In a little over a minute, all the buildings were going to blow sky-high.

At the rear door, Chip scooped up the bomb he had just planted. Frantically he began fiddling with the timer.

“Easy does it!” called Johnny. He raced to Chip's side and helped him reset the timer.

To ten seconds.

They put the bundle at the base of the door, smack in the center. Then they sprinted to the other end of the corridor.

Fooooooooom!

The building shook. Johnny and Chip were tossed into the air. They tumbled forward, crashing against a far wall.

The corridor filled with thick smoke. Johnny scrambled to his feet, coughing. “Chip!” he called out. “Are you okay?”

“I feel like a million bucks,” came Chip's voice. “Give or take a few hundred thou.”

“I think it worked!” Johnny answered. “I can feel cold air coming in from outside!”

“How much time before the place blows?”

Johnny held his watch right up to his eyes. He had synchronized it with the timers. “Forty seconds! Let's go!”

Johnny struggled blindly down the corridor, tripping over chunks of plaster and sheetrock. Sunlight was beginning to stream in at the other end, through the hole left by the explosion. Johnny made his way to the hole, then stepped through into the courtyard. Chip stumbled out after him.

A crowd had gathered nearby to gawk. Johnny yelled out,

“Run! The place is about to blow!”

“Get them!” the Mad Leader's voice bellowed over the speakers.

A few workers started after Johnny and Chip, but the workers didn't get far. They were caught up in a stream of people rushing toward the field. Johnny's warning had worked.

“Every escaping worker is to be shot on sight!” The Mad Leader's voice was tinged with hysteria, but the words were unheard, unobeyed.

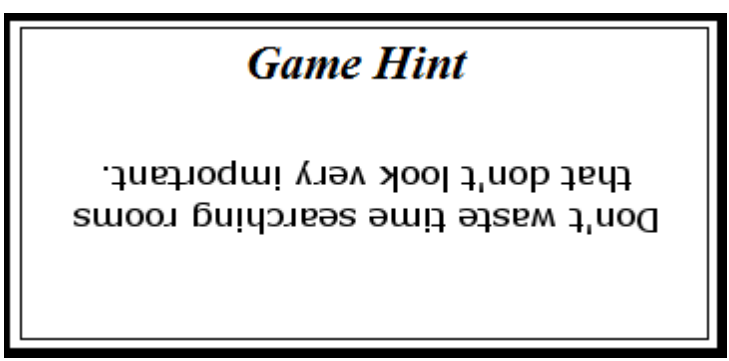
Johnny and Chip found themselves in the middle of a panicking stampede. Arms pushed, bodies fell, legs kicked. Johnny elbowed his way forward, as best as he could. “You with me, Chip?” he called over his shoulder.

His only answer was an agonized yelp.

Johnny whirled around. He held his ground against the rushing horde. Then, as the last of the workers lumbered around him, he saw Chip.

On the ground. Writing in pain.

Chip looked up, his face twisted with agony. “I can't walk!” he said through gritted teeth. “My ankle's broken!”



Chapter 22

Johnny knelt down. As he reached out to lift Chip, he caught a glimpse of his watch.

There were seventeen seconds left.

“No!” Chip cried in a voice swollen with anger, fear, and pain. “If you try to save me, we'll both die. Just go. One of us has to survive! You're an Infiltrator — you should know that!”

Johnny paused. His instincts told him Chip was right. Johnny McGibbits was an Infiltrator. The best. And the CIA needed its best people to stay alive. Sacrificing oneself was noble, but stupid.

At least that was how he'd been trained.

But Johnny had been trained to do a lot of things. He'd been trained to have a photographic memory for languages — and he'd confused the word for mission with the word for wombat. He'd been trained to use his common sense at all times — and he hadn't realized that an invisibility pill in a drawer might not be visible. He’d been trained to use his computer expertise — and he'd blanked out when the bomb deactivation program asked for a secret code.

Johnny's training had failed him when his life was on the line — but each time he had been saved.

By a wisecracking, comic-book-loving teenager with horrible taste in music.

The thought of leaving Chip ripped through Johnny's heart. He couldn't do it. Quickly, he dug his arms underneath Chip and lifted him up.

“You jerk, you fool, you idiot!” Chip screamed.

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” Johnny said.

Chip was heavier than he expected. Johnny held tight. His legs took on a life of their own. They pounded the frigid ground. He couldn't see his watch, but he knew time was running out. The compound was deserted. A hundred yards ahead of them, a hole

had been torn in a fence. Scraps of ripped clothing hung on the jagged edges, signs of the rampaging workers who squeezed through. If Johnny could get halfway there, he knew he'd be safe. Just fifty more yards…

That's when he saw the blinding light and heard the deafening explosion. That's when he felt his feet lift off the ground.

And that's when he felt Chip fly out of his hands as if he were made of cardboard.

Chapter 23

When Johnny woke up, the first thing he noticed was the wind. It sliced through the air, whistling, shrieking, whipping up snow. He had felt the wind in Yttrmchszia, but never actually heard it.

Yttrmchszia.

Suddenly he sat bolt upright. The memories came back to him in a rush. The chopper trip, the nerve gas, Dr. Gump, the nuclear bombs, the dynamite.

And Chip.

“Chip!” he called out. He stood up and looked around. Where the Mad Leader's compound had stood, there was now a snowcovered field with six massive, jagged hills — hills that used to be the Mad Leader's buildings. They had just been blown to bits, but the new-fallen white blanket made everything look cheery and peaceful.

His eye caught a dark figure on the horizon, walking away on unsteady legs. He ran after it, shouting as loud as he could, “Chip!”

The dark figure ignored him. It was wrapped in a full-length black cloak, and Johnny wondered where Chip had gotten it. “Hey, buddy, it's me, Doctor McGibbits - I mean, Johnny!” he said. He ran up behind the figure, reached out to touch its shoulder. It spun around.

Johnny immediately wished it hadn't. The face he saw wasn't Chip's. In fact, it wasn't much of a face at all. The right eye was missing, covered over by a crude skin graft. The nose curved suddenly to the left, as if it had been broken and never fixed.

But the worst part was the mouth. There was nothing physically wrong with it, but that was exactly what made it so frightening. It was as if a lifetime of anger and bitterness had concentrated itself in the one normal feature of this man's face. The mouth was dry and thin-lipped, and when the man sneered, his lips retracted to show a mouthful of rotted teeth.

Then the man spoke, and his voice ripped through Johnny like the sound of a fingernail scraping a blackboard. “You got what you wanted. Now go!”

“Mad Leader,” was the only thing Johnny could think to say.

“I'm not much of a leader now, am I, American stooge?” the Mad Leader said, practically spitting his words. “What are you going to do now, kill me?”

Johnny was stunned. He hadn't expected to meet the Mad Leader face to face. He hadn't been instructed on what to do if he did meet him.

“Tongue-tied?” the Mad Leader said with an expression that seemed to be a smile. “It's not often you see someone who looks like this, is it? At least you're not fainting, or trying to put a dog leash on me, or throwing me out of an orphanage because I made all the other kids have nightmares, or arresting me for being a public eyesore.”

“Don't try to make me feel sorry for you,” Johnny warned.

“Why should I?” the Mad Leader said. “Pity doesn't do me any good. I don't need your compassion, or anyone else's.”

“What do you need?” Johnny asked.

The Mad Leader let out a raspy chuckle. “You know the answer to that. The same thing you want — power. And I can get it by using the only beautiful part of my body. My only friend…” He pointed at his own head. “But now my days are over. You win, old boy. Why take me? I'll freeze to death on this horrible patch of earth. I suggest you look after your own.”

The Mad Leader cast a glance over Johnny's shoulder. There was a sudden moan several yards back toward the destroyed buildings.

Johnny whirled around. “Chip?”

“Unngghh… my foot…”

It was Chip's voice. Johnny rushed forward in the direction of the sound, but he couldn't see anything but snow.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a sudden movement. A small pile of snow shifted. A hand popped out.

Johnny ran there, kicking up white puffs around him. He pulled Chip out of the snow, brushed him off.

“Easy!” Chip shouted. “You know, my foot didn't get any better when you dropped me!”

“Dropped you?” For a moment, Johnny felt his blood boil. For a moment, Johnny regretted that this disrespectful teen had ever entered his life.

Then he realized there was something else he was feeling that moment. Something a thousand times stronger than all the aggravation, all the humiliation Chip had caused.

Something like happiness.

Throwing his head back, Johnny roared with laughter. He lifted Chip in his arms and held tight. Their screams of joy echoed through the frozen tundra like the sound of coyotes.

Then he remembered the Mad Leader. With Chip still cradled in his arms, he turned back around.

The tundra stretched before him for miles, broken only by the razor-wired fence that had once protected the compound.

The black cloak was gone.

“Where'd he go?” Johnny said.

“Who?” Chip asked.

“The Mad Leader,” Johnny replied. “He was just here. Didn't you see him?”

Chip shook his head. “You sure you weren't suckered by some hologram again?”

Johnny was sure. He had touched the man's shoulder.

Or had he?

Johnny didn't know what to believe. Maybe he had been hallucinating. Maybe the Mad Leader had figured out Dr. Gump's invisibility formula…

He couldn't think about it now. Even if the dark figure really was the Mad Leader, there would be no way for him to survive the long trek to civilization.

Well, probably no way…

Slowly, with a mixture of exhilaration, relief, and sadness, Johnny began his own long trek — back to the chopper.

Chapter 24

Johnny's fingers attacked the guitar strings. He jumped in the air and landed in a perfect split. When he struck the song's final chord, the stadium went berserk. All one hundred thousand people were on their feet, shrieking, clapping, stomping. Johnny could see the entire loge section swaying — but since he had designed it himself, he knew it could withstand the stress.

The President and his group looked a little uncomfortable in this setting. But even they couldn't help screaming "Bravo!" from their seats by the edge of the stage.

It was a little strange having to play at an event honoring himself, but then again, it was… fitting.

It was very Johnny McGibbits.

"Don't just stand there, take a bow!"

The voice was Madge's. She had sneaked around the side of the stand to shout her advice.

Oh. Bowing. Johnny had almost forgot. He stepped to the front of the stand. Even his own band members were screaming his name in rhythm. The chant of "John-ny! John-ny! John-ny!" swept through the stands like wildfire.

Johnny soaked it all in. He flashed a smile.

Then, suddenly, he turned around. He walked straight back, stepping over the snakepit of amplifier cables. When he got to the drum set, he reached across it with his right hand. "You're coming with me!" he said to his drummer.

"Get out of here!" the drummer replied. "I can't walk, remember?"

Johnny reached beside the drum set and picked up a pair of crutches. "Did you forget about these, Chip?"

"Hey, give me a break," Chip replied. "I told you I'd play, but you never told me you'd —"

The crowd noise was swelling, blocking out Chip's protest.

“You'd better get up before there's a riot in the stands!” Johnny shouted.

Red-faced, Chip grabbed his crutches. As Johnny guided him to the front of the stage, he complained all the way.

All around them, banners hung from the rafters, saying, “Thank You, Johnny and Chip!” and “McGibbits and Conley — National Treasures!”

“Uh-oh, I know what you have in mind!” Chip said. “You're going to throw me off the stage because I stole some of your thunder!”

“How did you guess?” Johnny said, stone-faced.

Johnny put his arm around his partner as they reached the front of the stage. When they took their bows, they took them together.

And they were both smiling.

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